



NBA PREVIEW

ESQ

DERRICK ROSE RETURNS, AGAIN

BY WRIGHT THOMPSON

AND KOBE WON'T LEAVE

BY HENRY ABBOTT

OCTOBER 27, 2014 \$5.99

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One look at his new number shows that LeBron is following more than just his heart as he returns to Cleveland.

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What's a storied NBA franchise to do when the face of the team, a first-ballot Hall of Famer, is also dooming it to failure? If that team is the Lakers, just wait for it to be over—and hope it's soon. By *Henry Abbott*

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PLAYBOOK

Marcus Mariota's trophy case might be stocked full by season's end.



COLLEGE FOOTBALL

HARDWARE IN STORE

BECAUSE WEEKLY SHAKE-UPS NEVER HAPPEN (RIGHT, MARCUS?), WE ASKED ESPN INSIDER PHIL STEELE TO GIVE US HIS **FOOLPROOF MIDSEASON PICKS** FOR THE YEAR-END AWARDS.



Everyone knows the Heisman Trophy loves QBs—they've snapped up seven of the past eight—so your 2014 winner will surely be Marcus Mariota. Wait, wait: Some Heisman winners come out of nowhere. Winston? Manziel? RG3? All relative unknowns before their trophy-winning campaigns. So dark-horse-turned-front-runner Dak Prescott is the guy. Then again, Heisman voters *occasionally* reward big-time receivers. [Very occasionally: The last wide receiver to win was Desmond Howard in 1991, and he returned kicks too.] So step right up, Amari Cooper. There's plenty of football left, but these three top my Heisman forecast [3-1, 3-1 and 4-1 odds to win, respectively]. Can't live with just one prediction? Here are five more to size up in the season's second half. —PHIL STEELE

1 DAVEY O'BRIEN AWARD: TOP QUARTERBACK

Mariota isn't letting a patchwork O-line stand in his way. That's why the Oregon junior is still my favorite (2-1 odds), despite an un-Mariota-like two turnovers against Arizona in Week 6. He's still tops in pass efficiency (202.4) and hadn't tossed an INT in 128 attempts heading into Week 7, so it'll take more than one subpar showing to surrender my top spot. Still, Prescott [3-1] is lurking. The Mississippi State junior is the only FBS QB to pass for 200 yards and run for 100 three times this year, and a big game [and big W] at Bama on Nov. 15 would likely leapfrog him over Mariota. He has already jumped Jameis Winston [4-1], who, despite improved pocket awareness in his sophomore year at Florida State, has nearly doubled his INT rate in 2014.

H
PHIL STEELE
TOP-10
HEISMAN
PICK

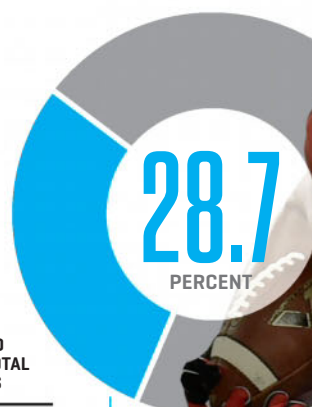
	NUMBER OF 90.0-PLUS QBR GAMES	POWER 5 RANK	POINTS ABOVE AVERAGE NUMBER OF POINTS ADDED TO THE TEAM'S SCORING MARGIN, COMPARED WITH AN AVERAGE QUARTERBACK	POWER 5 RANK	COMPLETION RATE UNDER PRESSURE	POWER 5 RANK
MARCUS MARIOTA OREGON	4	1	36.5	4	62%	2
DAK PRESCOTT MISSISSIPPI STATE	2	T-4	35.8	5	43%	T-17
JAMEIS WINSTON FLORIDA STATE	--	--	19.6	20	27%	53

2 DOAK WALKER AWARD: TOP RUNNING BACK

The recent suspension of Georgia's Todd Gurley (who would have been a 3-2 favorite to win the Doak) opens the door for the rest of a crowded field, now led by Wisconsin's Melvin Gordon (2-1) and Nebraska's Ameer Abdullah (3-1). The Big Ten counterparts meet Nov. 15, when Gordon's 8.3 yards per carry goes up against Abdullah's 146.3 yards per game. The back who wins that battle should have the best shot come December.

H

	NUMBER OF 200-YARD RUSHING GAMES	10-YARD RUSHES/TOTAL RUSHES
MELVIN GORDON WISCONSIN	2	23/105
AMEER ABDULLAH NEBRASKA	3	29/138
TODD GURLEY GEORGIA	1	27/94

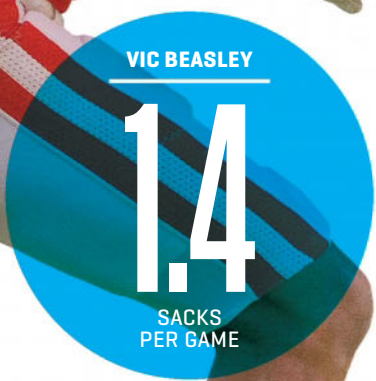
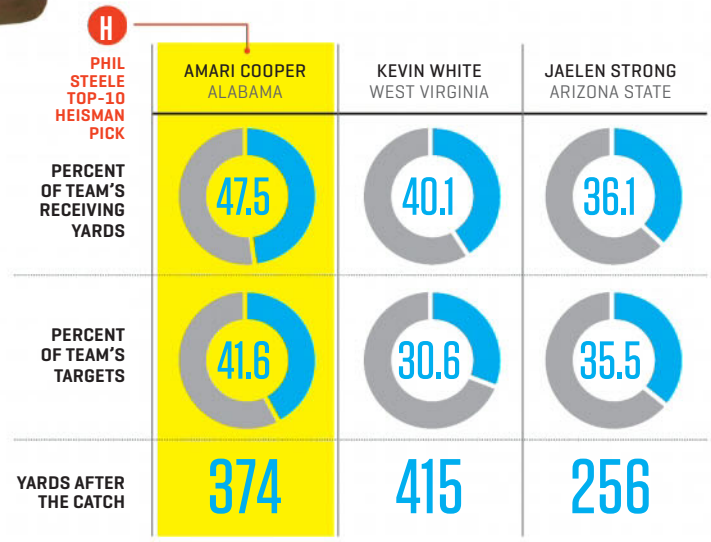
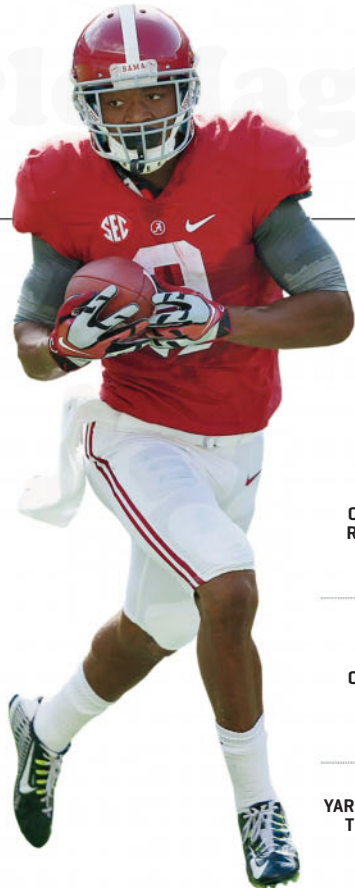


ALL STATS THROUGH WEEK 6.

PLAYBOOK COLLEGE FOOTBALL

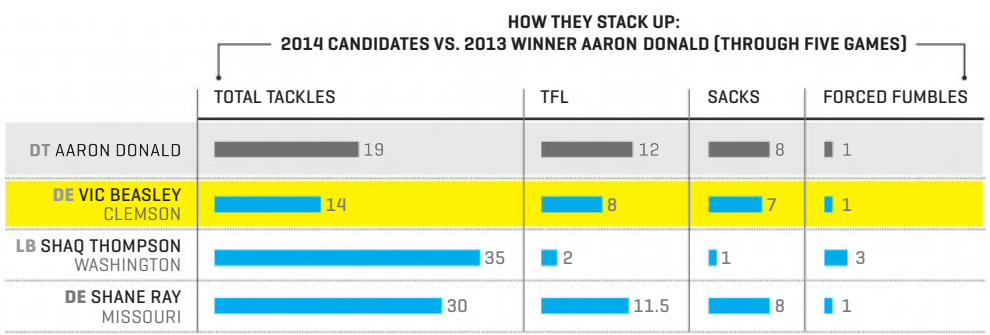
3 FRED BILETNIKOFF AWARD: TOP WIDE RECEIVER

Amari Cooper [6-5 odds] looks like the biggest favorite among this year's position battles. Alabama O-coordinator Lane Kiffin gets the junior plenty of touches (see right), and for a guy who draws double coverage often, he makes catches in traffic look easy: Cooper leads the FBS in long grabs, with 30 for 10-plus yards. I won't call them also-rans yet, but West Virginia's Kevin White [4-1], who has five straight 100-yard games, and Arizona State's Jaelen Strong [6-1], who came up huge against USC with 202 yards, just don't have the same exposure that Alabama gives Cooper.



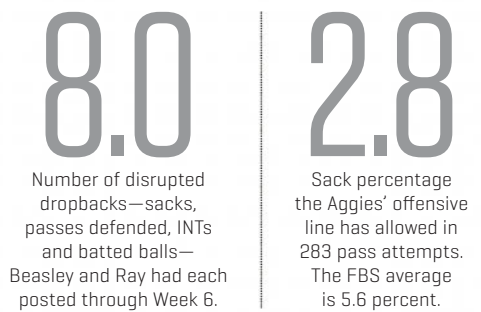
4 BRONKO NAGURSKI TROPHY/CHUCK BEDNARIK AWARD: TOP DEFENSIVE PLAYER

When you turn down the NFL in 2013, return to Clemson and improve your stat line in 2014 ... yeah, I'll slot you at the top for defensive player of the year. Vic Beasley [2-1 odds], the Tigers' fifth-year-senior defensive end, came up with 13 sacks last season and is on pace for 18 this year. But he doesn't own the market on eye-popping numbers: Washington's Shaq Thompson [4-1] has scored three TDs on defense and another on a 57-yard touchdown run on offense, while a whopping 38 percent of tackles by Missouri's Shane Ray [8-1] have come for a loss.



5 ROTARY LOMBARDI AWARD: TOP LINEMAN OR LINEBACKER

Since 2011, the Nagurski or Bednarik winner has also claimed the Lombardi Award. This year's double-dipper could be Beasley [2-1 odds] or Ray [4-1]. Ray is the better run stopper of the two, with 30 tackles to Beasley's 14. And while Texas A&M left tackle Cedric Ogbuehi is one of the best pass blockers in the country (see right), I give him just an outside shot [10-1] at taking home the hardware. No O-lineman has won since Orlando Pace in '96.



ALL STATS THROUGH WEEK 6.

FROM TOP: JOE ROBBINS/GETTY IMAGES; JOSHUA S. KELLY/USA TODAY SPORTS

SHOTGUN START

When Philip Rivers gets excited, he talks the way he plays. The words come fast, coupled with hand gestures and sound effects. So what has Rivers all fired up? The quick-strike offenses that have taken over the NFL—and turned the San Diego QB into an MVP candidate. “There’s more empty backfield, more shotgun, more deet, deet, deet,” he says. “Maybe the game is changing.” Oh, it’s changing, one completion at a time. Here’s how. —KEVIN SEIFERT

RIVERS’ COMPLETION PERCENTAGE

62.9% ⁷

NFL RANK

2011

64.1% ⁷

2012

69.5% ¹

2013

70.3% ¹

2014

1. THROWING BOLTS

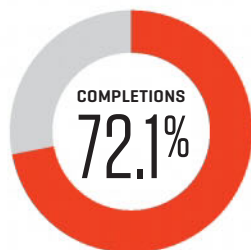
NFL QBs had connected on 63.7 percent of their passes through Week 5, up from 60.9 in 2011 and the highest rate since ‘01. In fact, Weeks 3 and 4 this season featured the two best collective completion percentages ever. Rivers’ success is largely due to his uptick in accuracy under second-year coach Mike McCoy (see chart above). Chargers OC Frank Reich says of Rivers: “His accuracy is in that upper 1 percent with guys like Tom Brady, Drew Brees and Peyton Manning. It’s a gift.”

2. SHORT AND SWEET

Heading into Week 6, 14 QBs had completion rates at or above 65 percent, up from an average of eight QBs from 2001 to ‘13. The reason? QBs are throwing more than half their passes within five yards of the line of scrimmage. Rivers’ 57.6 percent short-pass rate leads all QBs with at least 150 total throws. Yet Rivers also tops the NFL with 8.75 yards per attempt. “We’re still getting our chunks, but we’re not chucking it deep all the time,” he says. “Which is what you want, really.”

PASSES OF FIVE YARDS OR LESS

Quarterback completion rate on short throws is at its highest since 2006.



COLD HARD FACTS

PRESENTED BY



Philip Rivers is one of many NFL quarterbacks playing at an extremely high level. Here’s why the QBs of 2014 are the most efficient signal-callers in recent memory.

129

Number of interceptions thrown through Week 5. That’s 16 percent lower than the average INTs the past four seasons over the same span. After throwing 15 picks in 2012, Rivers has just 13 since the beginning of last season, the fourth fewest among QBs with at least 20 starts over that span.

65

Leaguewide Total QBR of quarterbacks in the shotgun or pistol this season. That’s 30 percent higher than when they’re under center and the best figure through five weeks since ESPN Stats & Information began tracking the stat in 2006. Rivers’ shotgun/pistol QBR is a cool 89.6, second in the NFL.

3.03

TD-to-INT ratio of quarterbacks on short passes [thrown five yards or less] in Weeks 1–5 of the 2013 and ‘14 seasons. That’s 58 percent better than the TD-to-INT ratio on similar throws in the first five weeks from 2006 to 2012.





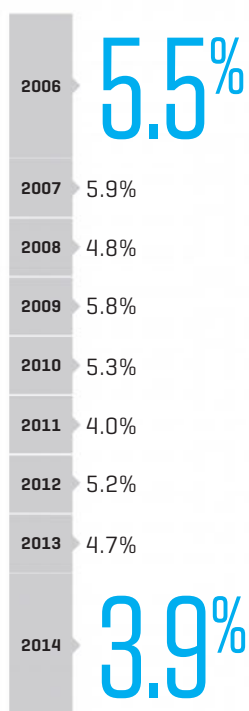
Since 2013, only Manning's 83.3 QBR is better than Rivers' 75.2.

3. CATCH AND RUN

How do short passes translate to long gains? For starters, as the chart below shows, pass catchers had dropped only 3.9 percent of their targets through Week 5, the best rate in the nine years the stat has been tracked. Plus, by getting receivers the ball in space, the yards-after-catch rate since the start of 2013 is 24 percent better than over the previous 10 years. Chargers receivers ranked fourth with a 6.24 yac rate through Week 5; WR Eddie Royal credits Rivers, saying, "His ball placement tells you where the defender is when you can't see him."

DROPS ARE DROPPING

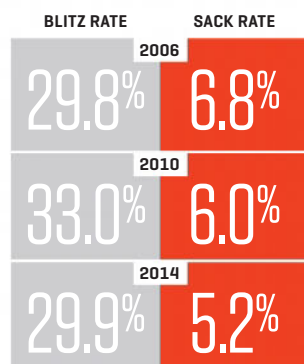
This season receivers are more sure handed than ever.



FOR AN EXTENDED VERSION OF THIS STORY, GO TO: es.pn/1oRYbPW

4. GUNNING IT

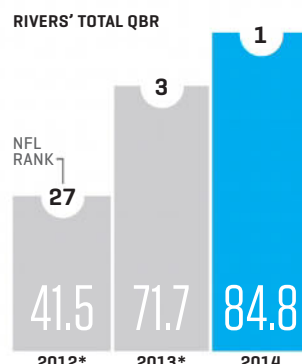
Through five weeks, QBs were lining up in the shotgun on 75 percent of dropbacks, up from 56 percent in 2010. Rivers' 94 percent rate since 2013 tops the league. Reich says the shotgun cuts a drop from 1.3 seconds to 1 second. That, along with the shorter passes, "discourages blitzing," says Rivers. Indeed, blitzes are at their second-lowest rate since '06. Not coincidentally, sacks are at their lowest rate.



Through Week 5 of each season

5. RIVERS FOR MVP?

What does it all add up to? A golden year in a golden era for quarterbacks—and a career transformation for Rivers. Weeks 3 and 4 produced the two highest overall Total QBR scores since ESPN Stats & Information began tracking the stat in 2006. And Rivers' 84.8 QBR is the second best for a QB through five weeks since 2010. The only one higher: Peyton Manning's 92.0 from his 2013 MVP season.



*Full season QBR



NIGHT

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NFL

LIFT OFF! GIANTS VET STEVE WEATHERFORD, 31, ON WHAT POWERS HIS PUNTS.

"I'm a big Olympic lifter. That gives me the best results in athleticism and explosion in my hips. Barbell dead lifts and front squats help develop muscle mass around my legs and give me more power in my kicks. There are several guys on my team who can lift more, but they lack flexibility and range of motion. It's all about overall fitness. All too often you hear about kickers and punters going in for a tackle and getting hurt. I don't want to be that guy. I think of my body like a muscle car. You might have 600 horsepower, but if you don't have the right-size tires or a compatible transmission, then that power is wasted."

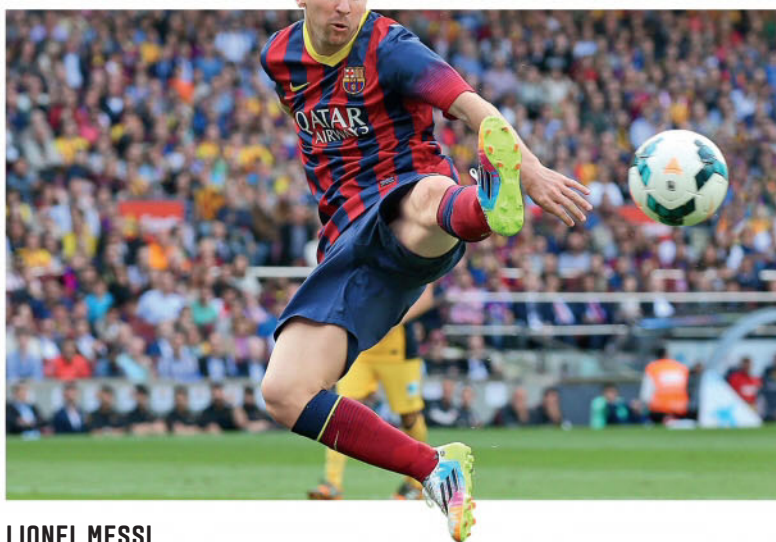
—as told to Adam K. Moussa

THE STARS REALIGN



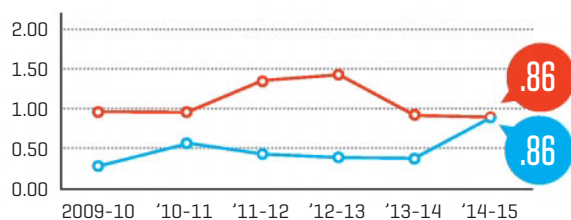
IN ADVANCE OF **EL CLASICO** ON OCT. 25, THE TWO MEN TO WIN THE PAST SIX BALLON D'ORS ARE CHANGING ROLES—DUE TO NEW TEAMMATES AND THEIR OWN LIMITATIONS. *By Michael Cox*

FC BARCELONA



LIONEL MESSI

For five years, Messi has been the heart and soul—and head and feet and legs—of the Barcelona offense. The world's most ruthless goal scorer, he has dominated Barca's striking play by taking or creating 40 percent of the team's shots since 2010. But with Neymar and Luis Suarez on the flanks of Barca's 4-3-3, Messi will replicate the deeper-lying, playmaking role he uses for Argentina. This season his passes are longer and played from deeper positions: His 4.1 passes per game into the penalty area is his highest in years. So while his goals are trending down, his assists are going up [below].



ASSISTS PER GAME

GOALS PER GAME



NEYMAR

Last season was an adjustment for the Brazilian—La Liga is faster and more technical than he was used to. As the left flank next to Messi and soon Suarez, Neymar doesn't have a new role, but he grasps it, and La Liga, better. So his scoring has improved—1.2 goals per game, up from just 0.3 last season.



LUIS SUAREZ

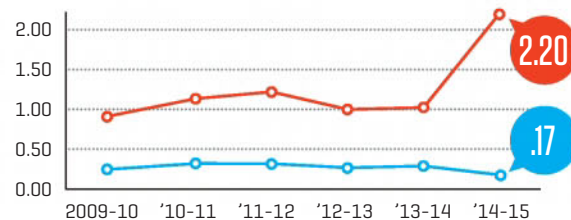
Suarez, who likely will debut in El Clasico, provides a potent threat in opponents' penalty areas: His 292 touches there last season at Liverpool was tops in the five major leagues. Sitting so high, he'll benefit from Messi's through balls from a deeper position, creating one-on-one chances against the goalkeeper.

REAL MADRID



CRISTIANO RONALDO

As Messi shifts back, Ronaldo is doing the opposite—with dangerous attacking midfielders like Gareth Bale and newcomer James Rodriguez, he is becoming a pure striker, less focused on distribution [below]. Ronaldo doesn't possess Messi's intricate passing skills, but his physicality means he's a better target for crosses in close-range positions: While fewer than half of his shots between 2010-11 and 2012-13 came from inside the penalty area, a full 58 percent have since the start of 2013-14. As for scoring returns? Ronaldo has 10 goals from play in six games this season—all but two coming inside the box.



ASSISTS PER GAME

GOALS PER GAME



JAMES RODRIGUEZ

The World Cup's Golden Boot winner is more of a playmaker with Real this season, but that suits him just fine—he's a classic South American No. 10, happiest when linking midfield and attack, centrally as well as from the left. At the World Cup, he had 0.4 assists per game to go along with his 1.2 goals.



GARETH BALE

While at Spurs, Bale modeled himself after Ronaldo, a goal-scoring powerhouse who shoots from afar. To avoid overlapping roles at Real, Bale focused on assists. [His nine for Ronaldo since 2013-14 is tops on the team.] But with Ronaldo now up front and Rodriguez on the flank, Bale is freer to play his natural game.



WALKING THE FAULT LINE

It isn't easy being the 49ers' head coach these days. And that's just the way **Jim Harbaugh** likes it.

BY SETH WICKERSHAM

JUST KNEW Jim Harbaugh would end up where he is now, 10 yards downfield from me on a fall Thursday afternoon, playing catch. No way could he resist.

He's wearing his usual outfit—black 49ers sweatshirt over a black 49ers T-shirt, black 49ers hat and cheap khakis with a can of dip protruding from the back pocket—and not showing signs of the tension I'm here to explore: why, exactly, his methods seem to have a shelf life.

His talent at turning losers into winners is matched only by his propensity to piss off people in the process. He's in his fourth year with the 49ers, a team that was in a decadelong morass before he arrived. But after three NFC championship game appearances and a close loss in

Harbaugh and 49ers linebacker Patrick Willis fire up the team before a preseason loss in Baltimore.

Super Bowl XLVII, the team seems to have all but concluded that unless this season ends with a championship, Harbaugh's way of winning is probably unsustainable.

Many successful coaches can be a--holes, of course. But in San Francisco, it's gotten strangely personal.

A few months ago, I happened upon a video of Harbaugh instructing high school quarterbacks, and when he picked up a ball, he seemed to come alive, energized by the power and possibilities at his command. It made me want to throw with him. You can learn a lot about someone by playing catch, including why they grate on people. There's a late-night bar story told in NFL circles about Peyton Manning's free agent visit with San Francisco in 2012. Harbaugh and Manning were throwing the ball, so it goes, when the coach couldn't help but remark that his passes had more mustard on them than those of the still-rehabbing future Hall of Famer. You can guess how that went over.

So I wrote him a note, asking if we could throw together. He called and tried to steer me toward profiling one of his assistant coaches or players. But it was catch, and he is, at heart, a quarterback. "I'll throw with you," he said. "But I'm not sure I'll answer questions."

TWO DAYS IN July served as a harbinger for the strange season that has unfolded for the 49ers, a first month of blown leads and chronically undisciplined play and reports surfacing every few days that years of strain between Harbaugh and seemingly everyone in the building are finally spilling over.

The first day was the ribbon-cutting to christen Levi's Stadium, a building decades in the making. It was not only a big deal, it was a chance for everyone to celebrate after a tense offseason.

At the time, few knew that the barely functional relationship between Harbaugh and 49ers general manager Trent Baalke—two men who can talk football but at the NFL combine didn't look at each other on a shared elevator ride—had started to spread to the front office and the locker room. Team CEO Jed York says there was a "rawness" that festered after the 49ers came up short three straight seasons. Harbaugh worked the players hard, tightening his grip, which prompted a few of them to voice concern to management. He had twice turned down contract extensions, and now, with two years left on the five-year, \$25 million deal he

signed in 2011, nobody knew whether he wanted to coach the 49ers next year and beyond, or even whether the 49ers wanted him.

So when Harbaugh scheduled a rookie practice during the ribbon-cutting, meaning that assistants and their wives couldn't attend, team officials were irritated. With everyone in suits and Commissioner Roger Goodell in attendance, Harbaugh showed up in his usual practice getup and left shortly after the ceremony ended.

A cold war was heating up. A speech Harbaugh delivered to the team a few days later, titled "2014 1st Team Meeting," explained his approach to battle. He usually writes in a spiral notebook, but this was typed and eight pages. "I will be your alarm clock and wake you early," he said. "It can be a great temptation to rest on the field and let the opponent have a play without making him pay for every inch. I must hold his pain where it is. Mine does not matter. ... The punishment I inflict, his fatigue, and that he is up against something that he does not comprehend is everything."

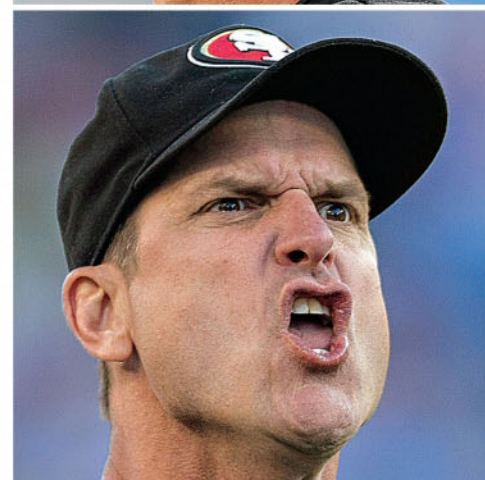
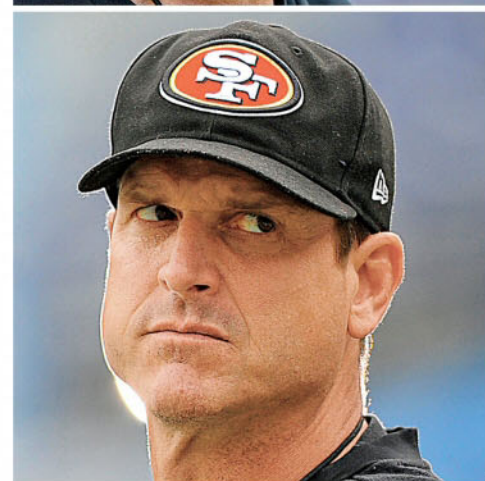
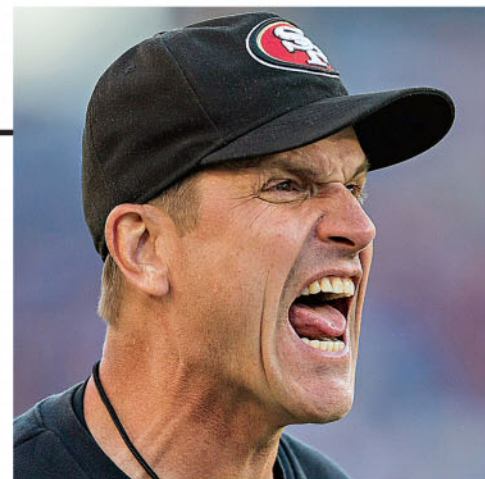
It was vintage Harbaugh, sincere and obsessive, inspiring and crazed. And as he described how he fights in the trenches, the speech's decisive moment contained a clue as to why a coach who has won 75 percent of his games might just be expendable: "My opponent is going to have to die. But does he have to kill me too? He is killing me. But he has a right to. I have never seen a greater opponent than him.

"I do not care who kills who now."

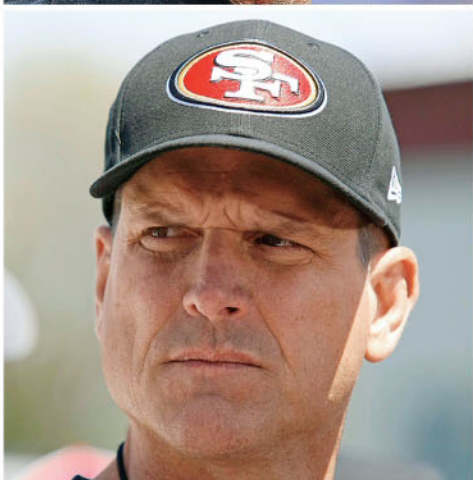
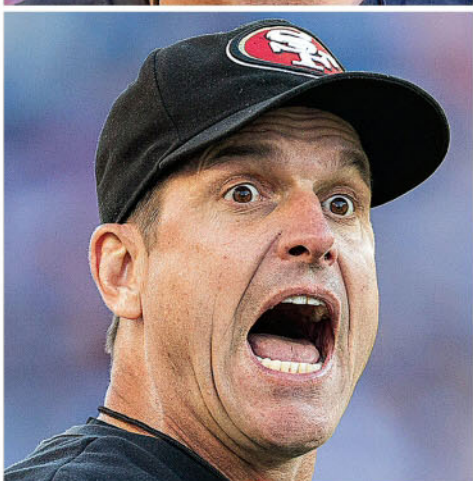
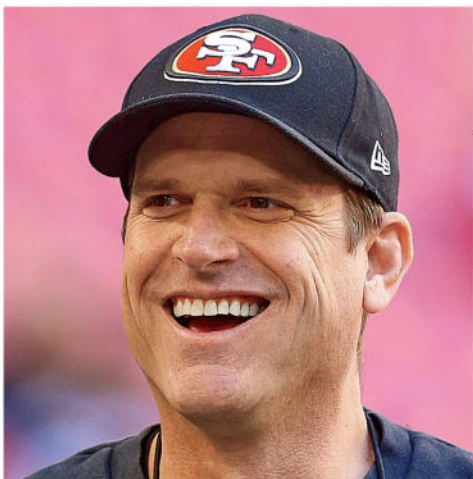
WHEN I FIRST read the line, I didn't buy it. If anything, Harbaugh cares too much. "Jim can't have an interaction without a winner or loser," one 49ers staffer says. But as we're playing catch, an old Harbaugh story makes me reconsider.

As a rookie benchwarmer in 1987, he begged the Bears to let him play special teams. He throws me the ball—even at 50, his passes produce the hiss exclusive to pro quarterbacks—and recalls the moment. He was on kickoff duty, charged with keeping contain. He was sprinting, battling a blocker, when a second one drilled him under the arm, knocking him off his feet, out of bounds and into excruciating pain. "It was embarrassing," he says.

It's strange to watch a proud man relive a story about getting his ass kicked. But as I throw back to him, I remember another line from his preseason speech—"Keep your head clear and suffer like a man"—and think maybe it isn't so strange after all.



**"MY OPPONENT
DIE. BUT DO
TO KILL ME"**



ENT HAS TO
ES HE HAVE
TOO?"

HE IS A vessel of pain. He inflicts it and welcomes it. Practice is supposed to suck. Games are supposed to hurt. Most coaches arrive with a calculated five-year plan. Harbaugh's plan is *kick ass*.

At the University of San Diego, where in three years he turned a joke of a program into a two-time Pioneer League champion, he ran hills with the players, sometimes pushing through his own vomit. At Stanford, where he engineered a once-in-a-generation turnaround, he renamed the Oklahoma drill the Stanford drill to signify the toughness he wanted to instill. At San Francisco, he makes the *winning* side run gassers after two-minute practice. "He's really good at making it suck," says Vernon Davis, who loves him. Harbaugh doesn't want a happy team. He wants the "least unhappy" team. "In the workplace, I don't look for friends. I look for allies," he said in the preseason speech, cribbing a line from TV's *Blue Bloods*.

Who's tough enough? Who can hang? Harbaugh creates tests the way a workaholic creates work. His battles with Stanford administrators, mostly over admitting qualified recruits, are legendary, and not missed, in Palo Alto. He'll burst into York's office at the crack of dawn with a problem that needs to be solved *now*. He sometimes uses his news conferences to back players in contract disputes, pitting them against the suits. Then he puts those players through miserable practices, leaving some of them to wonder whether, despite his mantra, others *do* have it better than they do. It's exhausting. According to someone who knows him well, Harbaugh has "figured out how to not be liked and how to function. It's been a strength his entire life. If he's going against you, he hates you."

That explains why Harbaugh, after taking over at Stanford in December 2006, took dead aim at Pete Carroll and USC. But a few 49ers staffers think the absence of that hate may have played a part in why the 49ers lost the Super Bowl to the Ravens and his older brother, John, two seasons ago. The one moment when Harbaugh couldn't hate his opponent coincided with the biggest game of his life. Before kickoff, the brothers chatted at midfield. As they shook hands to part ways, Jim pivoted away, his warrior instincts kicking in. But John, realizing the gravity of the moment, grabbed his younger brother's wrist and literally pulled him in for a hug. "I love you," John said. "Be good today."

"OK," Jim said, giving a one-armed pat.

He left and didn't look back.

Not a week passes in the 49ers' facility without someone reliving the strange playcalling in the fourth quarter of that game. Some on the team later wondered whether Jim was thrown off his game because John had confronted his younger brother with something he had no defense for: an act of love.

MANY HARBAUGH INTERACTIONS are uncomfortable. He has habits that mask his discomfort and any true introspection. He almost pathologically cloaks himself in catchphrases and quotes. Lincoln, Hemingway, Johnny Cash, Shakespeare, God, Nelson Mandela, Judge Judy, Bo Schembechler and even Calvin Coolidge make appearances in Harbaugh's news conferences, speeches and conversations. And he doesn't just quote outside sources to inspire players. He uses them to speak for himself, often when he's demoralized. "A man can be destroyed," he said after the loss to Seattle in last season's NFC championship game, nodding to Hemingway. "But he can't be defeated."

And when he's thinking about football, he detaches from the known world. You can ask him a question and he basically doesn't hear it. Brad Seely, the 49ers' special-teams coach, tried to make small talk with Harbaugh before a recent game. Harbaugh is famous for wearing one-inch cleats, and this game was on turf, so Seely asked, "You got turf shoes?"

Harbaugh stared at Seely with that familiar openmouthed gaze. He stared and stared and stared. Seely wanted to disappear. Others know better than to talk to him. Tim Drevno, one of Harbaugh's former assistants with Stanford and San Francisco, used to carpool with him in silence—except when they'd stop at the gas station for a can of dip and Harbaugh would realize that, as usual, he didn't have any cash on him.

It can make Harbaugh seem spacey or rude, but everything that isn't coaching football is a distraction. It's why he "cuts the drag" and wears the same clothes every day. It's why some are put off by his curt and gruff style. And it's why, after seconds of staring, Harbaugh told Seely, "No, I got my one-inchers on," and turned away.

HE'S GOING TO flip on me. He flips on everyone. One of his former employees has told me, "He's not really a d---, but he does d--- things."

At Stanford, Harbaugh stripped current Cardinal head coach David Shaw of



QB whisperer: Harbaugh went from a subject of Mike Ditka's rage in Chicago to a source of Andrew Luck's strength at Stanford.

responsibility for the offense, parted ways with a friend and former player who had attended his wedding and even fired some of the defensive staff after Stanford's first winning season in eight years—cruel moves or necessary but unpopular decisions, depending on how you look at it. “I don’t think he has any empathy,” the ex-employee says. “He has no way of putting himself in someone else’s shoes. It’s a strength and weakness. He just says, ‘I’ve gotta move on with my life.’”

I had prepared for him to flip a few days before we met when he called me and didn’t leave a message. I figured he was canceling catch, but later he texted: “Sorry ... Infamous rear end call. Haha.”

Still, as we throw, my defenses are up. He scoots back, stretching our passes to 20 yards, and I just know his ex-NFL arm is going to slay my everyman one, and he’s going to rub it in ...

But then something strange happens.

He’s not a d---.

He’s cool.

He compliments my release, which, as a lousy former high school quarterback—from Alaska, no less—makes me feel confident I won’t end up like Uncle Rico. When my first 20-yarder hits him in the chest, he says, “That’s your best one.”

Harbaugh’s gift for getting the best out of quarterbacks always seemed to be, like everything else, born out of his uncompromising combativeness. All of his stars—beginning with Josh Johnson at USD, continuing with Andrew Luck at Stanford and culminating with Alex Smith and Colin Kaepernick in San Francisco—knew that deep inside, Harbaugh would be hell-bent to prove he could still play. But the truth is, Harbaugh also showers

quarterbacks with the greatest gift they can receive: unfailing belief. He learned how to throw by aiming newspapers at doorsteps, so he celebrates different styles when other coaches might nitpick and overanalyze. Watch how Harbaugh pats Kaepernick’s shoulder pads after an interception or takes the bullets at a presser after the young quarterback is unconscionably slow getting off a play.

In his office, Harbaugh has a framed note from Mike Ditka. They famously exploded in 1992 after Harbaugh defied Ditka’s orders and audibled to a pass play that resulted in an interception returned for a touchdown. One writer wrote that on the sideline, “Ditka grabbed Harbaugh and shook the confidence out of him.” Harbaugh later admitted that the ordeal left him gun-shy, unthinkable for a man so cocky he once circled a picture of a model in a magazine, handed it to a Bears staffer and asked him to track down her number. Harbaugh’s career in Chicago ended a year after that blowup. He had to start over. The will that produced Captain Comeback with the Colts in 1995 wasn’t solidified in last-minute wins. It was the natural output of a healed scar.

The note, which Ditka sent after Harbaugh retired, reads, “I am still—believe it or not—your greatest fan.”

“Meant a lot to me,” Harbaugh says, simply.

IT’S HARD TO win in the NFL, and Harbaugh wins so much that some 49ers seem to take for granted what a few coaches privately argue: that Harbaugh, for all his faults, has done a damn good job of guiding a roster that isn’t as loaded with as many blue-collar guys as the front office would like to believe. Edgy personalities need to be kept on edge, the theory goes.

Some players complain that Harbaugh, who banned music and card games on flights, is too controlling, but as one staffer says, “They have no idea what controlling is.”

Members of the 49ers’ front office, though, privately talk about trying to keep Harbaugh’s chaos contained. And they have wondered if someone like defensive line coach Jim Tomsula could replicate Harbaugh’s intensity without alienating so many. They ask, *Is Harbaugh a great coach or does he just have a great record?*

They aren’t alone. Many who know Harbaugh well are surprised he’s turned out to be so successful. As a quarterback, he was not known as a technician; he was a scrambler and a grinder who, as his former coach Mike Riley says, “willed” teams to wins. Coaching, of course, is about the will to spend long hours in dark rooms. Few thought Harbaugh possessed the focus to do it. At Stanford, he was known for taking many bathroom breaks. But he is also known for hiring well and for having successfully lobbied for his staff to be the NFL’s highest paid. He both credits his assistants unfailingly and occasionally passes off their ideas as his own. The old quarterback seems to know he still needs a great supporting cast, a sign of the self-awareness some say he lacks. As he always tells offensive coordinator Greg Roman, “You can’t afford to have one bad coach on your staff.”

His rise is always compared with his brother’s, the way Eli Manning is always compared with Peyton, but the fact is that no NFL coach is quite like him. That makes the task of defining him—and, for York, defining his worth—so complicated. Harbaugh has defied the stereotype that a former player has to sever ties with his dream of throwing the game-winning

pass in the Super Bowl to be successful on the sideline. And except for two years as a Raiders grunt, he's never been an NFL assistant, defying the stereotype that only great coordinators become great head coaches. Says 49ers quarterbacks coach Geep Chryst, "Jim's had the great luxury of just being himself" and "tilting the axis so that everyone else adjusts to his vision."

Harbaugh's vision as a coach is unchanged from his vision as a quarterback: He trusts his instincts. That frustrates the 49ers' more buttoned-up staffers, who worry that his team's habit of botching situational football is rooted in Harbaugh's disorganization; last year, for example, some believed the coaches weren't emphasizing two-minute situations in practice, and sure enough, the season ended on a failed two-minute drive against Seattle. While the NFL is slowly trending toward a corporate and scientific style of football, a 49ers staffer says that, for better and worse, "we're the Scranton bureau."

Seriously. Harbaugh sometimes brings glasses of whole milk to coaches meetings, believing it builds strength. While other staffers slave past midnight, he lets his coaches leave early a few nights a week so they can have dinner with their families; he once even baby-sat the toddler of one of his assistants so the coach and his wife could have a date. He eats lunch with a different group of players each day to get to know them. He buys cakes on birthdays and has a Will Hunting ability to calculate quickly how many days someone has been alive. Harbaugh's methods, haphazard as they are heartfelt, are as true as his record but still leave staffers, as a former one says, "with the constant feeling like they're going to get exposed."

That feeling is validated when the 49ers blow leads against the Bears and Cardinals and nearly lose to the Eagles despite not allowing a point on defense. The camera always seems to pan to a pained Harbaugh, shaking his head and spitting, in a bind and powerless to stop the clock. Of course, many successful coaches—from Tom Coughlin to Bill Belichick—are also willing to risk locker room revolts for making unpopular decisions. And in a league full of phonies and frauds, Harbaugh is neither. "He treats the profession right," Riley says.

His instincts also cause trouble for opponents who know Harbaugh has just enough screws loose to dare to win. It's still amazing to



All business: Harbaugh made only a cursory appearance at the Levi's Stadium opening but did allow himself an unguarded moment with brother John before Super Bowl XLVII.

think that in 2012, when the 49ers trailed the Saints late in the fourth quarter of San Francisco's first playoff game in nine years, Harbaugh had the stones to call a quarterback sweep with *Alex Freaking Smith*. Smith ran untouched for 28 yards and a touchdown, and the call was pure Harbaugh: absurd, brilliant and even lucky. As he said in his preseason speech, "It is better to be lucky. But ... luck comes when you are ready."

CATCH IS SO much fun—I feel like I'm spinning it like Brady in 2007—that I forget to ask Harbaugh about a book that has influenced him. It's called *Only the Paranoid Survive: How to Exploit the Crisis Points That Challenge Every Company*, by Andrew Grove, the former CEO of Intel. I'm not sure it matters—Harbaugh is hard to hear from 20 yards away, and the only time he was asked about the book he punted, as usual. But the title implies that what seems like an unstructured program actually might be rooted in a larger blueprint, executed in extremis, because Harbaugh creates the crises as much as he exploits them—creates to exploit. Some 49ers staffers, for example, think he intentionally loses preseason games to manufacture an us-against-the-world mentality, a theory that the record doesn't support.

When Harbaugh arrived in San Francisco, the word on the street was that his ego was out of control, that he was trying to take over the building. Turns out, it wasn't true. Harbaugh's ongoing tension with management proves just how narrow his power truly is. He doesn't pick players or manage the salary cap. He coaches. It's easy to see how someone like Harbaugh would chafe at staying in the lane; Willie Taggart, the University of South Florida coach, says his friend "always believes he's right." And anyone who has witnessed Harbaugh's sideline tantrums can imagine how he handles not getting his way. But there are a lot of agendas in the building and a lot of jealousies over who should receive credit for the wins and who should be to blame for not having won a Super Bowl. More than the "disease of me," the franchise suffers from the "disease of almost."

York, in the vein of his uncle, Eddie DeBartolo, will say only that he wants to instill a mentality of Super Bowl or bust. He's fine if there's tension between his coach and GM but has also made it clear he will pick Baalke if forced to choose between them. There's also a sense that for as many reports that have surfaced of Harbaugh's wanting out or that his players want him gone, the coach doesn't want to leave. Pride would



“HARBAUGH HAS FIGURED OUT HOW TO NOT BE LIKED AND HOW TO FUNCTION.”

prevent him from returning to college ringless, having waved the white flag at the bigs. And neither the Raiders nor the Dolphins, the teams most often mentioned as trade partners, have a franchise quarterback, a new stadium or, for that matter, a personnel department led by Baalke, whom Harbaugh appreciates despite their discord. One person who knows Harbaugh well thinks he's just “awesome and crazy enough” to sign a long-term extension out of spite. But for all the unrest, it's strange how many people, in management and on the field, say they remain loyal to Harbaugh. “We want him to do well,” safety Eric Reid says. “If he does well, we do well.”

Harbaugh won't discuss his contract publicly, but he has said that he doesn't want more authority. Few buy it. Look at what happened in August. Niners executives are defensive about the fact that they have had a league-high 10 players arrested since 2012. They wanted to project a cleaner image. Right before the 49ers left for a preseason game in Houston, Harbaugh told the players: *Oh, management doesn't think you're dressed up enough, so try to dress nicer.* Nobody knew what that meant or had time to comply. Management, again, was frustrated. Maybe Harbaugh simply forgot to mention it earlier. Maybe he was returning to one of his go-to foils, playing the suits off the players,

creating crises. Or maybe this is how someone who thrives on being under siege acts when the chaos might be slipping slightly beyond his control.

Harbaugh ended his training-camp speech with a story, words for the players to live by this season, almost a premonition of what has transpired since. The story began, as many do, in his childhood. John was 10; Jim was 8. John had always stuck up for Jim in fights, but one day in their yard, John pushed Jim. So Jim punched John in the stomach. John welled up, and their dad came outside. As Jim recounted the scene:

What happened?

Jim punched me.

Why did you punch him?

'Cause he pushed me!

Dad said to John, “If you push someone, then they might punch you back. You understand?”

Dad said to me, “Jim, do you have something you want to say to your brother?”

I said, “Good, now he knows.”

“I learned that day that you can't count on anyone fighting for you except for you,” Harbaugh told the team. “You have to be prepared to fight and finish your own battles. We have 16 fights and finishes scheduled—playoffs and Super Bowl to be determined. That wouldn't make a bad T-shirt!”

CATCH IS FINISHED. We're walking toward the 49ers' building. Harbaugh is relaxed. I'm anxious because I'm about to pose the question I've posed to everyone else.

“What is it about you that people find so difficult?”

“Oh, I don't know,” Harbaugh says.

He leans back slightly, kicks his one-inch cleats in the grass. He suddenly seems tired, as if he thinks he gets a bum rap but doesn't want to admit it. I worry he's going to take the ball and fire it at my nose.

He stares at me, not with the look he gave Seely but one gentler, wiser, more weathered, the sun highlighting the gray in his short hair and deepening the creases around his eyes. He grins and, of course, enlists a little help.

“There's a saying by Ralph Waldo Emerson,” he says. “As long as all that's written is said against me, then I feel a certain assurance of success. If people are heaping flowery words of praise upon me, then I feel exposed to my enemies.”

Now I'm the one staring blankly. Seconds pass.

He says it again: “As long as all that's written is said against me, then I feel a certain assurance of success.”

Then he hands me the ball as a souvenir and says, “I prefer that.” ■

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WHO WIELDS THE POWER IN TODAY'S NBA? Is it Derrick Rose (page 42), upon whose knees teeters the balance of power in the East? Is it Kobe Bryant (page 74), whose power plays are destroying the Lakers from within? Is it NBA owners, as they seek the power to probe every aspect of their players' bodies (page 64)? Is it the nouveau power Cavs, perennial power Thunder or Borg-like superpower Spurs—the teams our Power Rankings project to battle for this season's title (page 52)? These are the questions of this NBA season. And if questions demand knowledge ... and if knowledge equals power ... then with this issue, consider yourself empowered.

A close-up portrait of basketball player Derrick Rose. He is looking upwards and slightly to the left with a contemplative expression. He has short, dark, curly hair and a light beard. He is wearing a dark blue or black hoodie. He has diamond stud earrings in both ears. The background is a solid, dark grey.

THE
THIRD
COMING
OF
DERRICK

R O S E

**THE FORMER
MVP RETURNS
TO THE GAME
A CHANGED MAN—
AND NOT JUST
BECAUSE OF HIS
RECONSTRUCTED
KNEES.**

BY WRIGHT
THOMPSON
PHOTOGRAPHS BY
PETER HAPAK

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THE LIFE DERRICK ROSE wants back is three days away, and not a thing in the world but time can bring it any closer. He must endure a little more, leaning against the wall in the corner during a break in a photo shoot, alone, doing calf stretches then touching his toes. When action in the private gym resumes, he won't dunk, rising until he hears the shutter click, then tucking the ball and landing as softly as he can. That's one of the many lessons he learned during his time away. Every dunk costs something, a debt that will demand payment months, even years, from now. He's about to turn 26. He wants to save his legs.

"Everything is starting up," he says, bracing for what's to come.

It's a Friday in late September. The Bulls report for preseason in 72 hours. The question of the past three years—can he return to his career previously in progress?—will soon have

an answer, which everyone close to Derrick wants to hear, even if that answer is no. A cycle of injury and recovery finally has an end date, a month ahead and closing fast.

"Where's the first game?" his agent, B.J. Armstrong, asks, watching the action. "New York?"

Randall Hampton, Derrick's best friend since sixth grade and now his assistant, smiles.

"Yeah," Hampton says, "then Cleveland."

INERTIA SMELLS LIKE fried perch and chicken wings covered in that odd South Side concoction known as mild sauce. Reggie Rose, like

everyone in his brother Derrick's small inner circle, is waiting, and at this particular moment he's waiting on his order at Harold's Chicken Shack No. 55, in the middle of a tour of Englewood, their old Chicago neighborhood. They've all gotten very good at waiting; today, a Thursday, is the 880th day since Rose blew out his ACL and began his rehab, punctuated by a torn meniscus a year and a half later. Reggie has been counting the days, watching him struggle to heal.

"His thing is wanting to be the same," Reggie says.

Reggie finishes lunch and drives away,

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“I WAS TOO ANXIOUS.

I WANTED IT TOO BAD....

IT JUST WASN'T ME.”

—ROSE, ON HIS FIRST COMEBACK

eventually making his way east on West 63rd Street. Thirteen years older, his domineering presence kept Derrick from being picked apart by the Gangster Disciples who controlled their neighborhood, then the parasitic runners and gatekeeping NCAA officials who controlled the avenues and mechanisms of escape. Nothing, not drug dealers or money-hungry basketball pimps or amateurism-guarding schoolmarms, would keep his brother stuck in Englewood. Traffic is thin as he crosses Halstead Street, with Kennedy-King College looking modern and alien at the intersection. Everything else is plywood and blight.

“You know what?” Reggie says, turning thoughtful, surrounded by reminders of his past. He thinks about Derrick, and how three years ago, his then-22-year-old brother was innocent and unafraid, the best basketball player on the planet.

“He knows that he will never get back to that,” Reggie says.

That’s the admission everyone has been digging for, but that’s not what he means: The new Derrick Rose is explosive and aggressive, but he’s coming back like Eve came back from the apple, mining intellectual and emotional depths he couldn’t have imagined when he first hurt his knee. He’s different now, for sure, maybe for better, maybe for worse. The old Derrick Rose is a casualty of the two injuries and the knowledge that came with them.

“He’s gone,” Reggie says, and he sounds a little melancholy.

THIRTEEN MILES SEPARATE Derrick Rose’s apartment at the Trump Tower above the Chicago River and his boyhood home at 7305 S. Paulina St. When he’s longing for something he can’t articulate, perhaps a reminder of what he’s gained, or maybe what he’s lost, he gets in his car and makes the drive: often the E-Way to 57th Street, Garfield over to Ashland, then Ashland up to the Murray Park section of Englewood. When he arrives at his old house, he slows down but never, ever stops, turning back onto Ashland Avenue and accelerating

toward his new life among the skyscrapers and meat palaces of downtown.

At one of those meat palaces this summer, sitting around a table upstairs, Derrick tells Reggie and Randall about his recent vacation. He got home two days prior from Sag Harbor in the Hamptons, one last breather before the most important basketball season of his life. At the end of his trip, he withdrew, full of tension, moving around the rented house like a ghost. When he’s relaxed, he’s hilarious, his tough magazine-cover frown replaced by a boyish grin, softening all his features. But when he’s focused, he becomes quiet and shy. With the season staring him in the face, Derrick didn’t feel like talking. His girlfriend noticed him turning inward. Seven hours before leaving the Hamptons, he texted Randall back in Chicago: He wanted to shoot when he got home.

Rose’s private plane landed at Midway Airport, and a little while later he walked into his apartment high above the city. Sometimes he stands at the floor-to-ceiling windows and thinks. He can see his old neighborhood from his living room, and of all the distances people measure in their lives, such as the 30 months since he tore his ACL, this is the distance that matters the most.

He knows what is happening down there in the dark.

In the month before Derrick left for vacation, 68 violent crimes were reported in Englewood alone, and 49 of them occurred on the street or sidewalk. Almost every night, someone gets shot in the neighborhood, and the murders fill the pages of the *Tribune* and *Sun-Times*. It is not safe to go outside. Four months ago, the city reeled when a 14-year-old girl named Endia Martin was murdered, not by a stray

bullet but in cold blood by another girl in a Facebook dispute over a boy. A South Side church filled with mourners. Before the service, Rose drove down and quietly went inside the sanctuary to pay respects to the parents, leaving again just as quietly, not wanting to create a scene. He just wanted them to know he too was mourning the loss of their little girl. When they looked up and saw Derrick, their eyes widened, because 13 miles south from his new life, he isn’t a person but an idea, proof that better days might be ahead.

His mere presence embodies the idea of escape.

ALL DERRICK ROSE ever wanted was a new life for himself and his family. The desperation of that dream is often minimized in its retelling because the ghetto escape story is such a worn plot twist in the sports myth machine that the hopelessness of an urban slum is seen as an obstacle like any other, such as, say, a knee injury. He lived at the center of a limited, shrinking world.

Ask Derrick where he’s from and he’ll say, “Chicago.”

Ask what part and he’ll say, “South Side.”

Ask what part and he’ll say, “Englewood.”

Ask what part and he’ll say, “Murray Park.”

Murray Park runs eight short blocks east to west, four longer blocks north to south: 71st to 74th Street, Ashland to Damen Avenue. The defining memory of growing up in a place like this isn’t the violence, poverty or fear, but the oppressive and daily presence of limitations. The 71st Street boundary stood like an international border. On the other side, a rival set of Gangster Disciples controlled the area around Raster Park. Nobody crossed without

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permission. Their whole world consisted of those few blocks.

Last month Reggie drove over to Raster and found the old basketball court gone. All that's left are the fading white lines. A few blocks away, Murray Park offers not only rims but the rarest of sights in a rough neighborhood: nets. Out of respect for Rose, and for the hope of a life beyond 71st Street, the Gangster Disciples and local residents protect the court.

A block west of the park, at least nine Roses lived in the small house on Paulina Street that belonged to his grandmother. His mom, Brenda Rose, worked multiple jobs, and her three older sons took care of Derrick, taking turns cooking meals. Reggie especially tried to be the father his brother never had. In an interview after his son, Derrick Jr., was born, Derrick offered a rare glimpse into the hurt he still hides, saying he knew he'd be a great dad, as long as he did everything different from his own father. Reggie is asked whether Derrick's dad had ever reached out to his famous and wealthy son.

"No," he says, and he changes the subject.

Despite Brenda Rose's jobs, the family fell behind in the usual ways that poverty encircles and traps: an unpaid bill to Sears, a bankruptcy a few years later in 2002, when 14-year-old Derrick, the same age as Endia Martin, was realizing that his skill might be the miracle a family like his needed to start over. He chased it at the exclusion of everything else, and although he made it, he and his family still carry the marks of Englewood. In expensive restaurants, with foie gras and lobster on the menu, Derrick will order a grilled cheese, ignoring the raised eyebrows and laughs of his brothers and friends, because there was a time when the comfort of a grilled cheese was the finest thing he could imagine.

BRENDA ROSE NOW lives in a nice house on a quiet, leafy cul-de-sac in the Chicago suburbs. Not long ago, she rented a bouncy castle for her 60th birthday, bringing all the grandkids over and finding a gift in their laughter, knowing

TOP: Rose's NBA ascent looked unstoppable: rookie of the year in 2008-09; All-Star in 2009-10; MVP in 2010-11, leading the Bulls to the best record in the league.

MIDDLE: Rose tore the ACL in his left knee in a 2012 playoff game and spent the next season rehabbing. "Knowing that my season was out," says Rose, "I felt useless."

BOTTOM: Rose takes the court for one of only 10 games he appeared in during 2013-14. On Nov. 22, he tore the meniscus in his right knee, returning him to rehab.



9.5

NO GUARANTEE

According to ESPN Insider Kevin Pelton, since the 1976-77 ABA-NBA merger, 31 players have recorded a WARP [wins above replacement player] higher than 5, then suffered an injury that effectively cost them the next two seasons. Only one of them, Zydrunas Ilgauskas, returned to his pre-injury WARP level [9.5]. Rose now seeks to become No. 2.

they'd never live the life she left behind. Reggie Rose drives a Bentley and an Escalade, and at Harold's Chicken Shack, waiting on the order, he buried himself in his phone, looking at studio apartments in the same Trump Tower where his brother lives in a sprawling penthouse. They have investments, a share in the famous Giordano's pizza chain, and generation-skipping trusts so Derrick's money changes the arc of his family long after he's gone.

Derrick got the Rolls-Royce he always fantasized about, the one he promised he'd sleep in the first night he brought it home. He won rookie of the year in 2009.

Sitting on the back of Bulls team flights, he'd share his past with teammate Luol Deng, then ask questions about Deng's family and life in war-torn Sudan. Deng says he was struck by Derrick's compassion, by his innate understanding of overcoming something. "He was really interested in the African culture," Deng says. "He asked a lot of questions. It sparked his curiosity. His mom was similar too. When she met my mom, she asked a lot of questions. The questions somebody asks tells you a lot about a person. I think he asked questions like that because he cares. He has a huge heart. He can be emotional about it."

Then, in 2011, Rose became the youngest MVP in league history.

During the news conference, after being introduced with a comparison to Magic, Bird and Jordan, he smoothly thanked everyone, until he got to his mom. She looked up at him, and tears ran down her cheeks.

At the podium, he struggled to speak.

"Um ...," he said, because how do you tell a story so heavy it drags down nearly everyone who must carry it?

Her lip quivered, and his lip quivered.

"Brenda Rose," he said, and his voice cracked.

They had escaped, and all because of him.

"Those were hard days," he said, looking down at his mom. "My days shouldn't be hard. My days shouldn't be hard because I'm doing what I love doing. That's playing basketball."

Eleven months later, he tore his ACL.

REGGIE SAT COURTSIDE that night, behind the basket, and Derrick fell to the ground right in front of his seat, maybe 10 feet away. All of the photos of the moment show the pain in Derrick's eyes, or the concerned doctors kneeling around him, but in a few of them, Reggie is visible in the background, sitting behind a TNT cameraman. He looks as if he's about to puke.

Trainers loaded Derrick into an ambulance. He'd left his phone in the United Center locker room, so he had nothing to do but think. The sirens stayed off, and in the back, still in his Bulls uniform, he thought he'd be OK. The ambulance hitting its brakes jostled his knee.

"Mine stopped at every light," he says now, laughing. "I felt a jerk at every light."

His family followed behind the ambulance, a caravan of seven or so cars sticking close, but he couldn't see them. He was alone. Rush University Medical Center is a mile from the arena, rising between Damen and Ashland avenues, the boundaries of his former life, and inside doctors and nurses moved around, talking quietly to each other, running an X-ray and waiting for the results. "By that time," he says, "I think everyone knew that I tore my ACL. I didn't know, and they were just trying to hide it from me."

In front of the television, John Calipari watched the injury and knew the road ahead. He had reason to worry because, of the many things he'd learned about his former star guard

at Memphis, one was Derrick's low tolerance for pain. One memory stuck out for the coach. Shortly after Derrick started practicing as a freshman, the Tigers scrimmaged against Saint Louis University, and going hard to the rim, Rose was forced to the ground by contact.

"He yelled like he was shot by a sniper," Calipari says, still remembering the stretcher. "I was literally physically ill."

He pauses, a savvy storyteller, waiting to deliver the most important detail.

"He practiced the next day," Calipari says.

At Rush hospital, Rose waited for his family to find him in his room. When Reggie finally walked through the door, he saw his brother still wearing his uniform, an air cast on his leg. "He's just looking at me like—almost to the point that, like, he let somebody down," Reggie says. "He's like, 'I can't believe this,' with his head down. You know, I'm the strong brother. I'm the one that ruled with the iron fist. I couldn't protect him from that. And I couldn't protect myself from shedding a tear."

After about two hours, they gathered in Derrick's high-rise. He took off his uniform—leaving one part of his life behind and starting another—and stood in a hot shower. His family gathered in the apartment, and that night he could hear the murmur of their conversations. He climbed into bed and tried to sleep, unable to move his leg. Reggie tried to say the right things: "I said, 'Derrick, I know you a God-fearing man. It's like this: You prayed and



At the FIBA World Cup this summer, an inconsistent Rose averaged 4.8 points. Says his college coach, John Calipari, "He's still trying to figure out what his body is saying."

asked God for everything you wanted in life, you went to college, you in the NBA, you got all this money. He gave you everything. So you gotta look at it like this: This could be a challenge for you. What do you have to do to keep it?"

NEARLY THREE YEARS of recovery later, just three days before the first Bulls practice, Derrick Rose is finishing his grilled chicken at a hedonistic Rush Street steakhouse—*Gotta eat right*, one of his many mantras—and opening up about how the person sitting in this restaurant is very different from the one who went up in the air and landed in a heap: a physical change, yes, but an interior one too.

"You do look at everything," he says. "Start with yourself first. I looked at myself as far as just who I was as a person."

Rose approached his first recovery like a jock. He pushed himself. He believed, however foolishly, in the possibility of complete recovery, of resuming an ascent without losing anything. "I was too anxious," he says. "I wanted it too bad. I wanted to prove everybody wrong. I don't know, it just wasn't me."

He refused to come back until he felt ready, despite an avalanche of media and fan judgment. Something in his body seemed wrong, even when doctors told him his knee could withstand the rigors of a game. When he returned in the fall of 2013, he played 10 games before tearing the meniscus in his other knee.

The cruel, bad luck of it all must have called into question every deeply held belief about the world and how to navigate its obstacles. Some of this is supposition; he struggles to explain something he felt more than thought. While the first injury prompted worries about his body, the second seemed to prompt worries about the entire nature of things. Even the redemptive quality of hard work finally exposed itself as a shiny lie.

So with another season to watch instead of play, Derrick began studying opponents—then he studied himself, seeing flaws he'd never noticed before. Winning a title required

"breaking the code," as he puts it, so he vowed not to just fly around the court but to figure out what separated the champions. At home, Reggie noticed something subtle but important, which all children of doting mothers hungry for more time will recognize: "Tell my mother no," Derrick learned to say, creating boundaries with everyone, even the woman he wanted to give a new life to with his talents.

In October 2012, six months after his first injury, Derrick Jr. was born. As Rose recovered from his second injury, his son was becoming a little person. That changed Derrick too, perhaps most of all, making him imagine a distant future instead of the world right in front of his face. There's a funny story he likes to tell: Once, he stayed at the Four Seasons in Istanbul, a former Ottoman palace, cocooned in hushed luxury. Looking out at the water, he felt as if he had found the pinnacle of status, only to see an enormous yacht at anchor, more of a ship than a boat. After asking around, he learned that it belonged to the rock band U2, in town for a sold-out show. There is always something bigger to chase.

Turns out, his brother was right. The old Derrick Rose is gone. It's fair to wonder whether he's lost some essential part of himself in the transaction: Will he long for parts of the life he left behind? Rose already gets nostalgic remembering the chicken fingers

from Rainbow Submarine on 71st Street, a place that's no longer safe for him to visit. What if he forgets about the way a hot grilled cheese felt when he first lifted it from the plate? Once the blinkers come off, they can never go back on again. The new Rose seems to be learning, a little more every day, that he's pushed by deeper desires than buying his mom a new house.

"My whole life was basketball and just trying to make it out of the area I grew up in," he says. "Of course, school was great, but my biggest goal was to make it out, and you had to go to school. I knew that at the end of the day, I knew I had to do something for my family. I was just thinking about my mom, and just trying to change her life. I knew that I didn't want to go selling drugs or cracking cars. I didn't wanna do that."

Sitting at the steakhouse, thinking about how his life has changed, he reveals his latest hobby. "Reading," he says, shaking his head.

He sheepishly admits that he's started a lot of books but hasn't finished one yet. He's searching. "Even before he got hurt," Calipari says, "he was still trying to figure out: Who am I?"

One of the books Derrick likes is Malcolm Gladwell's *Outliers*, which explores the traits that make certain people successful. It's a book about Bill Gates, J. Robert Oppenheimer and the Beatles, but it's also a book about Derrick Rose. Leaving Englewood wasn't enough. He wants to win championships. He wants to be

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NBA 2014-15

the greatest player in the world, then the greatest player ever, which means he needs to be somehow even better than before. Deep inside, he believes that these goals are possible, and that his talent can deliver them.

Newly curious, he seems happy. Everything he wants is right in front of him, and he'll know in a year, maybe two, whether he can have it—or whether his dreams evaporated when he blew out his knee. All this will be fascinating to watch. His second mission begins now, and, as with the first one, he doesn't know how it will end. Internal drives aren't easy to understand, much less defeat, even if he is healthy; Michael Jordan won every battle he fought, and he is entering middle age unhappy and lost. Derrick Rose escaped his neighborhood and his old life, but he remains a citizen of his own ambition.

HIS FIRST TIME on the court against real competition came at the Team USA camp in Las Vegas this summer. He talked about “making the team,” like a junior high player, the language of someone starting over, and nobody knew what to expect. Reggie sat in the stands during the first scrimmage of the first day and described what happened: When the opposing point guard caught the first inbounds pass, he wheeled around and found the 2011 NBA MVP in an aggressive crouch, shuffling his feet, Derrick Rose guarding the full 94 feet.

A buzz started in the gym. Glances, then whispers, spreading the word: D-Rose is playing a tryout like it's Game 7.

“I'm in the stands,” Reggie says, “I'm looking at everybody almost like, ‘Yeah, motherf---ers.’”

Calipari watched the workouts in Vegas and saw the familiar explosiveness and quickness. The only part of Derrick's game lagging behind, he says, is the belief that everything will be OK once he steps onto the court. “I'm anxious,” Calipari says. “He's still trying to figure out what his body's saying.”

Nobody knows whether Derrick Rose will be the same, not even him, but he's ready to find out. Sitting at the steakhouse, which happens

to be the one where Jordan once held court after home games, Rose is asked to visualize opening night in New York. He doesn't describe putting his jersey back on or the sound of the crowd or the glow of the lights. He's over the superficial, focusing on the process: Returning to the hotel from shootaround and, instead of wasting time in his room at the New York Four Seasons, goofing off on the Internet, he can see himself lying in bed, his legs wrapped in sleeves connected to the NormaTec compression machine, promoting circulation and positive blood flow. He imagines napping, resting his legs, then waking up and going to the arena. When he visualizes his return, he doesn't see himself playing. He sees himself doing work.

THAT TRIP TO the Hamptons gave him a final moment of stillness before the work began, and even there the coming struggle crept in.

“My mind, I'm always thinking,” he says. “That's one of the reasons I'm so quiet. Just try to think everything through, process everything, realize where I'm at in my life. Realize some of the things I didn't achieve that I wanted to achieve. And just try to learn from my mistakes. And learn from other people's mistakes. That's why I been watching a lot of history—learning about history and watching a lot of documentaries.”

In Sag Harbor, Rose and his girlfriend rode bikes around town. They played hour after hour of Rummikub, a game they found in the secluded house they rented. Every day, they tried a different restaurant she'd researched and chosen, a mix of high-concept new American cuisine and linen-draped, waterfront-sunset perches. In the mornings, they went to a fancy resort-town breakfast spot. A man could not get further from the streets of Englewood, with endless new dishes to taste, from crab and eggs to organic red quinoa. The chef grows all the vegetables in a garden outside. Derrick tried the famous pancakes, with the boutique maple syrup, but one morning, he wanted something not on the menu.

He ordered a grilled cheese. ■

20-SECOND
TIMEOUT

ESPN'S NBA FRONT OFFICE—OUR WAR ROOM OF TOP NBA MINDS—WILL DEBATE ALMOST ANYTHING. THE TOPIC FOR THIS 20:

WHO IS THE NBA'S
BEST POINT GUARD?

COACH GEORGE KARL: Tony Parker deserves more credit. Is he the most talented? No. Does he put up the best numbers? No. But he is the Spurs' motor.

DIRECTOR OF ANALYTICS KEVIN PELTON: Statistically, Chris Paul is clearly the guy. He was first last season in real plus-minus among point guards and second overall.

DIRECTOR OF SCOUTING AMIN ELHASSAN: Yeah, it's Chris, but I get the feeling that he has trust issues with teammates. Tony? He trusts his guys. Coach, you had Gary Payton—what was he like?

KARL: Gary did not question anyone else's basketball IQ. There are times you can go there and be judgmental, but it should be a positive correction. I'm not saying that's the failure of Chris, but other leaders in the league are better at it.

GM TOM PENN: I love Chris, but I was surprised by how he didn't perform in the playoffs. So ...

THE FINAL ANSWER

TONY PARKER

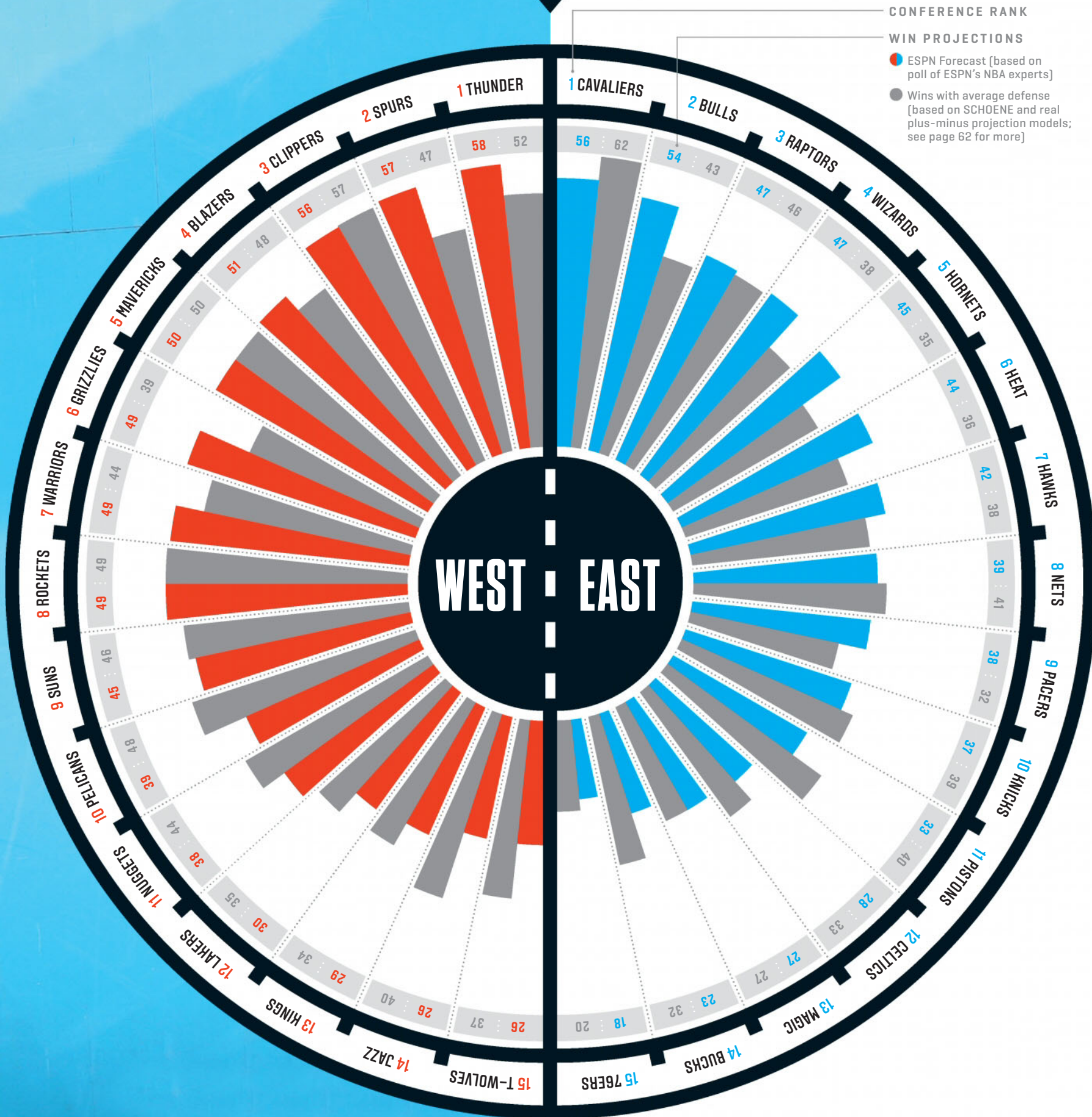


E POWER RANKINGS

TRUE STORY: THE PAST 20 NBA CHAMPS HAVE, ON AVERAGE, RANKED BETTER ON DEFENSE THAN OFFENSE. D EQUALS W'S. SO ON THE FOLLOWING PAGES, YOU'LL FIND HEAT MAPS FROM ANALYTICS GENIUS AUSTIN CLEMENS THAT GRAPHICALLY PROJECT EACH TEAM'S 2014-15 DEFENSE BASED ON TWO YEARS OF SHOT DATA. HOW MIGHT THE THUNDER, CAVS AND BULLS UPEND THE SPURS? THE MAPS, ALONG WITH ESPN'S STARTING UNIT OF HOOPS EXPERTS, SHOW YOU THE WAY.



A bird's-eye view
of the coming
Western
Conference finals.





EAST

1

CLEVELAND

CAVALIERS

WIN PROJECTIONS

56

ESPN Forecast

58.5

Las Vegas

PROJECTED STARTERS

Kyrie Irving (2013-14 DRTg: 108), Dion Waiters (110), **LeBron James** (105), Kevin Love (104), Anderson Varejao (103)

BRINGING THEIR TALENT

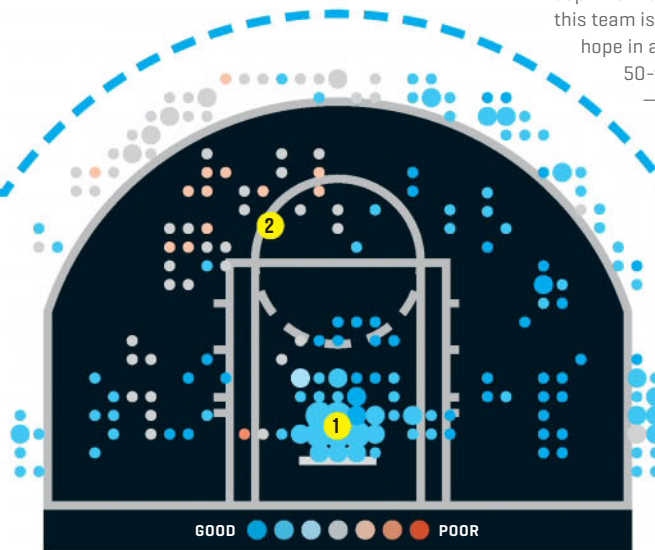
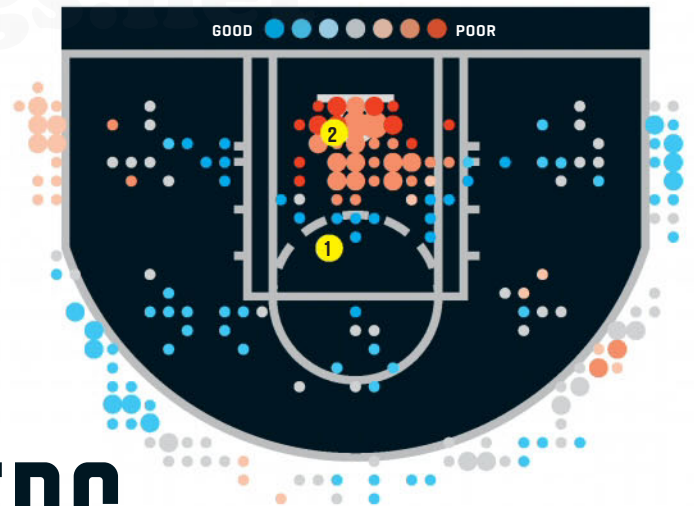
In a wave of transactions that crested to become the best offseason in NBA history, the Cavs extended Irving, signed LeBron and acquired Love. On paper, with the game's best trio, the Cavs project to an absurd offensive rating of 118 (the Clippers are No. 2 at 114.5) and are a sure No. 1 seed in the East. In reality, questions remain: Will Irving coexist with 2-guard Waiters? Can LeBron and new coach David Blatt get Love and Irving to embrace team defense? Is there depth to make a run? Regardless, this team is the city's best hope in a long time to end a 50-year title drought.

—BRADFORD DOOLITTLE

PROJECTED TEAM DEFENSE

1 Varejao won't force shooters out to midrange, but he's just mobile enough to shift them away from the rim.

2 With only Varejao in the paint, the Cavs allowed teams to shoot 62.8% at the rim last year (25th in NBA). Varejao still mans the middle, but he needs help.



WIN PROJECTIONS

54

ESPN Forecast

55.5

Las Vegas

2

CHICAGO

BULLS

PROJECTED TEAM DEFENSE

1 Last year the Bulls, led by Noah and Taj Gibson, allowed the second-fewest made FGs at the rim. Both are back.

2 The Bulls force plenty of midrange shots, but they allow a high FG% from the right elbow.

PROJECTED STARTERS

Derrick Rose (DRTg: 101*), Jimmy Butler (100), Mike Dunleavy (102), Pau Gasol (108), Joakim Noah (96) *2011-12

BACK ON TRACK

Good news, Bulls fans! The team is no longer solely dependent on Rose for offense. Versatile scorer Gasol (career DRTg: 113) gives Chicago a second super-skilled big to pair with Noah; 6-foot-10 Euro sharpshooter Nikola Mirotic (.461 3PT% at Real Madrid) and college superscorer Doug McDermott should help the team's 28th-ranked offense; and Tom Thibodeau is still there to manage the various skill sets. But winning it all comes down to Rose's health. If he's fit, this is a championship-caliber squad; if not, the added talent, along with Bulls mainstays Butler and Taj Gibson, still leads this team on a long postseason run. —B.D.



3 TORONTO RAPTORS

WIN PROJECTIONS



PROJECTED STARTERS

Kyle Lowry [DRTg: 106], Terrence Ross [107], DeMar DeRozan [107], Amir Johnson [104], Jonas Valanciunas [104]

INSIDE-OUTSIDE, UPSIDE NOW

After Rudy Gay was traded early last season, guards Lowry [20.1 PER] and DeRozan [22.7 ppg] produced career years. But for the Raptors to contend in the wide-open East, all eyes will be on the center, Valanciunas [11.3/8.8]. While his 2013-14 numbers were respectable, Valanciunas was playing an ancillary role [ninth on the team in frontcourt touches, 20.5 per game]. A more aggressive Valanciunas opens up the perimeter, where Toronto shot a solid 37.2 percent last year. That could be the difference between a playoff appearance and the Eastern Conference finals. —JORDAN BRENNER



4 WASHINGTON WIZARDS

WIN PROJECTIONS

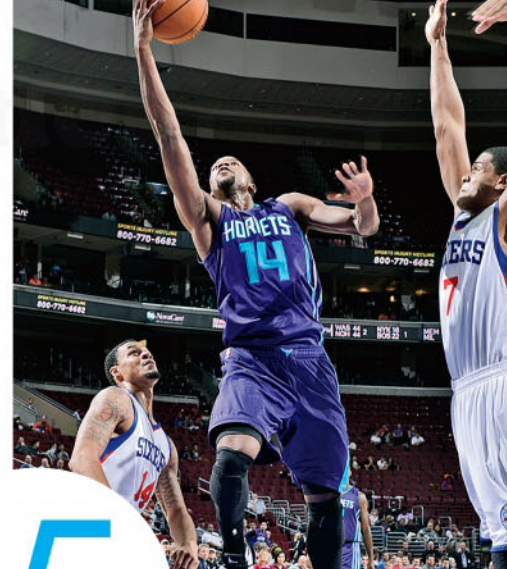


PROJECTED STARTERS

John Wall [DRTg: 104], Bradley Beal [107], Paul Pierce [106], Nene Hilario [103], Marcin Gortat [103]

HITTING A WALL?

Fresh off their first playoff appearance since 2008, the Wizards added much-needed depth by poaching 37-year-old wing Pierce from Brooklyn, acquiring PF Kris Humphries and inking Gortat, who averaged 13.2/9.5 last season at center, to a five-year extension. But while the Wizards are locked in to win now, the strategy might be misguided. Wall, Beal and Otto Porter [average age: 22] already have injury histories, and coach Randy Wittman steered Washington to a mediocre 17th-ranked offense last season. —TOM HABERSTROH



5 CHARLOTTE HORNETS

WIN PROJECTIONS



PROJECTED STARTERS

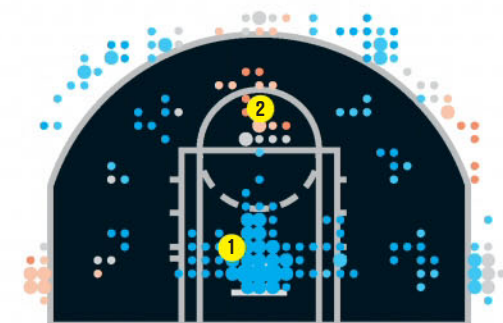
Kemba Walker [DRTg: 105], Lance Stephenson [101], **Michael Kidd-Gilchrist** [103], Cody Zeller [102], Al Jefferson [100]

BREAKING OUT AT THE HIVE

The Hornets will try to carry the momentum from a shocking playoff trip into this season, with Stephenson and lottery pick Noah Vonleh joining the fold. Jefferson is a machine on the blocks [projected WARP of 7.7], but without furry-faced facilitator PF Josh McRoberts, who averaged 4.3 apg last season, the Hornets will rely increasingly on isolation plays. Even with the backcourt of Walker and Stephenson, the SCHOENE projection system sees the Hornets in the bottom 10 in offense again after ranking 24th last season. Still, this defense gets you to the playoffs. —T.H.

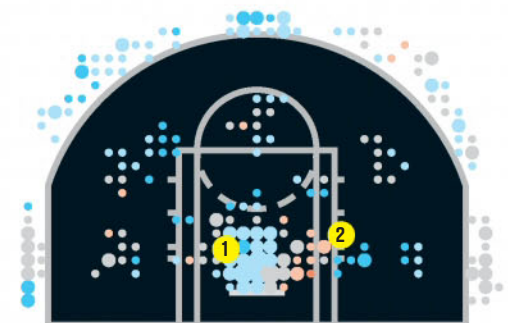
PROJECTED TEAM DEFENSE

GOOD POOR



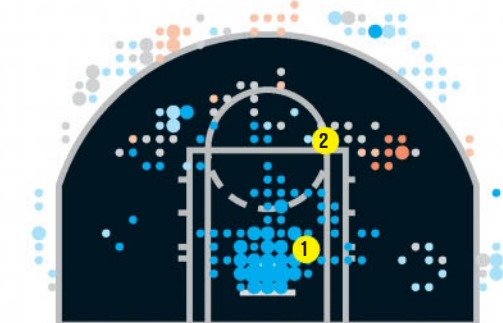
1 The Raptors don't block shots [4.2 bpg last year], but J-Val and Johnson are terrific interior defenders, pushing shots outside.

2 Toronto gives up long 2s, but there are worse sins. Teams shot just 37.5% from midrange in 2013-14, second lowest in the NBA.



1 Twin towers Nene and Gortat, with their combined 4.1 plus-minus and 95.5 DRTg last season, will again be terrors at the rim.

2 The Wizards will struggle at the post because their interior defense is slow to rotate from one side of the paint to the other.



1 Steve Clifford should get COY votes: His help defense will protect the rim, even with Big Al. This D projects to be third best in the NBA.

2 Stephenson will help the perimeter defense; his aggressive style should hinder opponent FG% [44.2% in 2013-14].



6 MIAMI HEAT

WIN PROJECTIONS



PROJECTED STARTERS

Mario Chalmers [DRtg: 106], Dwyane Wade [106], Luol Deng [107], Josh McRoberts [105], **Chris Bosh** [104]

FEELING THE BURN

Two of the Big Three, Wade and Bosh, remain in South Beach, and with the Heat's big-name offseason acquisitions—Deng, McRoberts and Danny Granger—this is still a playoff team. But how far will Miami go? It boils down to health. With Chris Andersen, 36, and Udonis Haslem, 34, still playing big minutes, the Heat will trot out the fifth-oldest roster in the league. And the departure of Ray Allen means the franchise has no legitimate insurance plan in case Wade, who's played full seasons just twice in the past five years, misses 30 games again. —T.H.



7 ATLANTA HAWKS

WIN PROJECTIONS

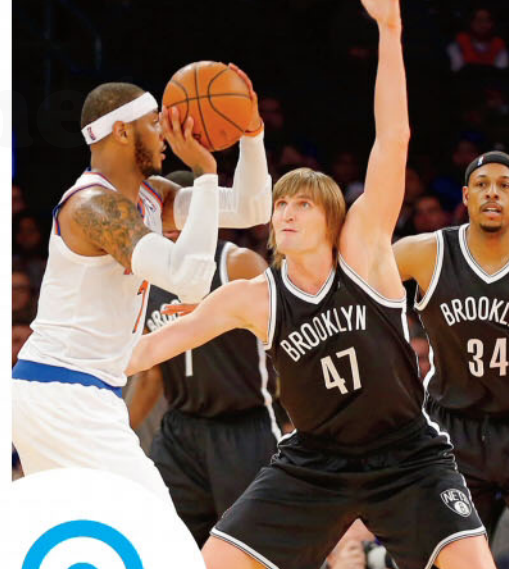


PROJECTED STARTERS

Jeff Teague [DRtg: 109], Kyle Korver [108], DeMarre Carroll [106], Paul Millsap [102], **Al Horford** [104]

LONG SHOTS, AGAIN

No Eastern Conference team attempted and made more 3-pointers than the Hawks last season (768 of 2,116), and the additions of ex-Thunder 3-and-D specialist Thabo Sefolosha and stretch-4 rookie Adreian Payne (42.3 3PT% at Michigan State last season) will help them pour it on from deep again. As long as the 6-10 Horford (career-best 22.0 PER last season) stays healthy at center, this team figures to make the playoffs yet again, extending its East-leading streak of seven straight postseason appearances. Just don't expect much more. —T.H.



8 BROOKLYN NETS

WIN PROJECTIONS



PROJECTED STARTERS

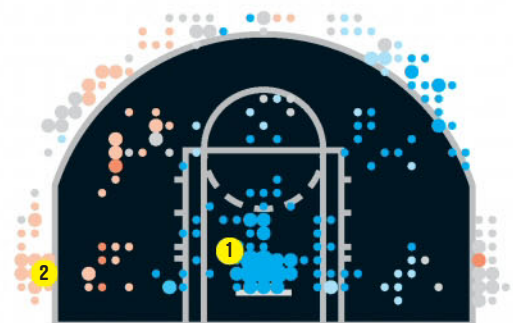
Deron Williams [DRtg: 109], Joe Johnson [112], **Andre Kirilenko** [107], Kevin Garnett [101], Brook Lopez [108]

NO FUTURE LIKE THE PRESENT

For better or worse, the future is now for the Nets. If Williams (17.6 PER last season, lowest since 2006-07) and Lopez (96 games combined in the past three seasons) stay healthy, they will be an effective pick-and-roll combo to pair with Johnson, who shot 40 percent from 3 last year. In the East, that alone could be worth a playoff spot. And the continued development of C Mason Plumlee (19.0 PER as a rookie) will help the Nets challenge the Raptors for the Atlantic crown. But if Williams and Lopez both miss time, well, at least the Nets have a first-round pick in the 2015 draft. —J.B.

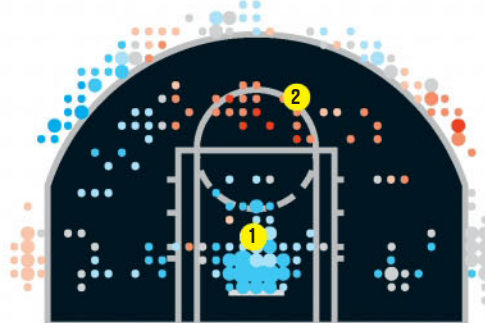
PROJECTED TEAM DEFENSE

GOOD POOR



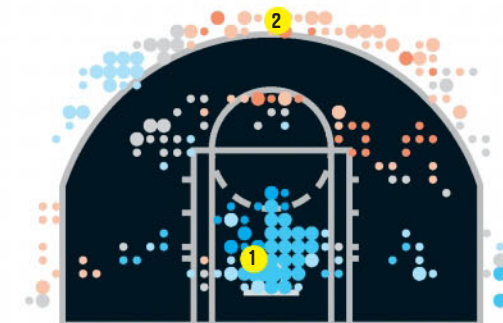
1 Bosh's length and exceptional ability to defend the pick-and-roll (0.53 opponent ppp last year) will prevent good shots inside.

2 Their gambling style of D resulted in 116 right-corner treys last year, most in the NBA. Without LeBron, that style might have to change.



1 This is a defense on the rise because of tremendous interior versatility from frontcourt stalwarts Millsap and Horford.

2 Teams shot 40.5% from midrange last year, sixth highest in the NBA, as Carroll is the team's only elite perimeter defender.



1 At 38, the eternally young KG still provides elite interior D to make up for slow-to-rotate teammates in the paint.

2 The Nets get pelted at the top of the arc (488 made 3s on 36.3% shooting) because of their reliance on slower perimeter players.



WIN PROJECTIONS

PROJECTED
STARTERS FOR HEAT MAPS OF TEAMS
9-15, VISIT ESPN.COM/NBA
INDIANA
PACERS
38
ESPN
Forecast
32.5
Las
VegasGeorge Hill
Rodney Stuckey
C.J. Miles
David West
Roy Hibbert

SUMMERTIME BLUES

This offseason was unkind to the Pacers, who lost swingman Paul George to a gruesome broken leg at a Team USA scrimmage and lowballed SG Lance Stephenson out the door to Charlotte. Now more than ever, the 7-2 Hibbert must protect the paint—Indiana allowed an NBA-low 1,059 FGs at the rim on just 53 percent shooting. The offense, which ranked 23rd with George [21.7 ppg] and Stephenson [13.8], will now rely on 34-year-old West [14.0] and Stuckey [13.9], who shot 27.3 percent on 3s with Detroit last season. —B.D.

NEW YORK
KNICKS
37
ESPN
Forecast
40.5
Las
VegasJose Calderon
Iman Shumpert
Carmelo Anthony
Amar'e Stoudemire
Samuel Dalembert

WELCOME TO PHIL'S JUNGLE

It gets worse here every day. The Phil Jackson era begins with an isolation star as the focal point of a triangle offense. What could go wrong? Melo scores [27.4 ppg] and uses tons of possessions [32.4 USG%] but fails to elevate teammates. Then again, those fellow Knicks include oft-injured Stoudemire, his cringe-worthy backup Andrea Bargnani [27.8 3PT%] and the unreliable J.R. Smith [41.5 FG%]. After winning 11 titles coaching in Chicago and LA, the Zen Master will need to familiarize himself with a foreign concept: losing. —J.B.

DETROIT
PISTONS
33
ESPN
Forecast
36.5
Las
VegasBrandon Jennings
Jodie Meeks
Josh Smith
Greg Monroe
Andre Drummond

BIGS TROUBLE

The experts warned that the skills of promising bigs Drummond, Monroe and Smith would not mesh. Yes, Drummond led the NBA in OReb rate [17.5 percent] and rebound rate [22.3 percent], but Detroit ranked 19th in O and 25th in D. Forced into a perimeter SF role, Smith made just 26.4 percent of a career-high 3.4 3PA, and likewise, PF Monroe, a natural center, saw his production [18.1 PER] regress to his rookie rate. The same trio returns, in the same spots, with the same problems. And there's little new coach Stan Van Gundy can do. —B.D.

BOSTON
CELTICS
28
ESPN
Forecast
26.5
Las
VegasRajon Rondo
Avery Bradley
Jeff Green
Kelly Olynyk
Jared Sullinger

POINTED QUESTION

How the Celtics handle the future of the ever-petulant Rondo will prove far more interesting than what they do on the court this season. Boston did little to upgrade the NBA's fourth-worst offense [102.9 points per 100 possessions last season] or its 18th-ranked D. Instead, the Celtics hope third-year C Sullinger [13.3/8.1 in 27.6 mpg] hones his perimeter game [26.9 3PT%] and that rookie Marcus Smart shows enough promise to take the point in a post-Rondo world next season, when they'll have \$30 million to throw around. —J.B.

ORLANDO
MAGIC
27
ESPN
Forecast
28.5
Las
VegasVictor Oladipo
Evan Fournier
Maurice Harkless
Channing Frye
Nikola Vucevic

TOO GOOD TOO SOON

After two years of sitting idly in a slow rebuild through the draft, GM Rob Hennigan curiously tapped on the accelerator by signing supreme stretch 4 Frye to a four-year deal. Orlando's youth movement is very much in full throttle, with promising rookies Aaron Gordon and Elfrid Payton joining a 23-and-under crew of Oladipo, Fournier, Harkless, Vucevic and Tobias Harris. The 31-year-old Frye, who was real plus-minus's 11th-ranked player in 2013-14, might make the Magic too good now for their own good later. —T.H.

MILWAUKEE
BUCKS
23
ESPN
Forecast
24.5
Las
VegasBrandon Knight
G. Antetokounmpo
Jabari Parker
Ersan Ilyasova
Larry Sanders

KIDD'S KIDS

The Bucks nosedived last season and paradoxically generated real signs of hope. While new ownership is breathing some life into the organization, the Bucks now feature a contending foundation on the court. Parker, the No. 2 pick in June, has a star's mentality and skill set [19.1 ppg at Duke as a freshman]. The 6-11 Antetokounmpo was a revelation as a rookie, showing a raw, long bundle of skills. [Name another 2-guard who covers 75 feet in two dribbles.] Memo to new coach Jason Kidd: Install a running style. —B.D.

PHILADELPHIA
76ERS
18
ESPN
Forecast
15.5
Las
VegasM. Carter-Williams
Tony Wroten
Hollis Thompson
L.R. Mbah a Moute
Nerlens Noel

A LOSING EFFORT

The Sixers' best player can't shoot, their center sat last season with a bum knee and their No. 3 overall draft pick is out with a foot injury. And that's the good news—because it's all part of the plan. Last season's ROY, Carter-Williams, will eventually find a shot [40.5 FG%], while Noel should hold up on a new knee. Without pressure to contend, their top pick, Joel Embiid, won't be rushed back. If they improve the NBA's worst offense [99.4 ORtg] and fifth-worst D [109.9 DRTg], great! Just don't foul up next year's lottery. —J.B.

WEST



OKLAHOMA CITY

THUNDER

WIN PROJECTIONS

58

ESPN Forecast

57.5

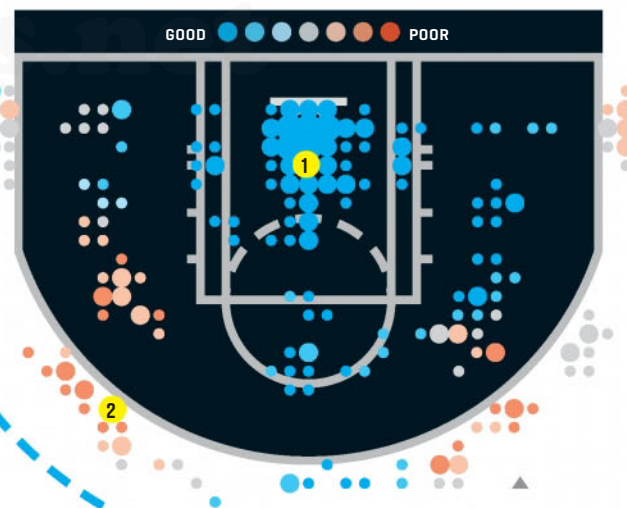
Las Vegas

PROJECTED STARTERS

Russell Westbrook [DRtg: 102], Reggie Jackson [106], Kevin Durant [104], **Serge Ibaka** [102], Kendrick Perkins [104]

FORK IN THE THUNDER ROAD

The clock continues to tick for the Thunder. Despite a perennial MVP candidate in Durant, they no longer clearly top the West in terms of talent or potential. Shooting guard Anthony Morrow [45.1 percent from 3 last year] is a nice addition, but any meaningful improvement must come from within. Specifically, second-year center Steven Adams [projected WARP of 1.5] needs to take more minutes from incumbent Perkins [minus-3.3 projected WARP, league worst at any position]. It's still realistic to think the Thunder can win the loaded West and end the season as NBA champions. But any other result and the narrative shifts toward Durant's 2016 free agency. —KEVIN PELTON



PROJECTED TEAM DEFENSE

1 They're great inside thanks to Duncan and Splitter [58.6 FG% against at the rim last year], and they don't foul, allowing the fifth-fewest FT attempts.

2 The Spurs project as fourth best in pushing shots outside the paint but are slow on the perimeter.

SAN ANTONIO SPURS

WIN PROJECTIONS

57

ESPN Forecast

56.5

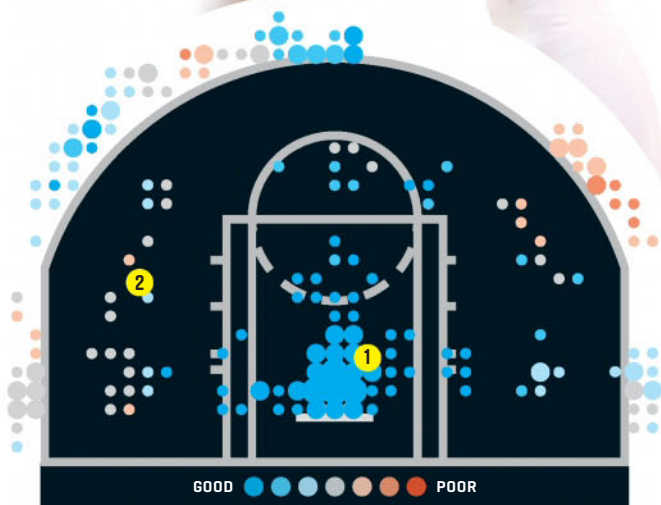
Las Vegas

PROJECTED STARTERS

Tony Parker [DRtg: 107], Danny Green [101], Kawhi Leonard [98], Tiago Splitter [102], Tim Duncan [98]

SAME OLD SPURS

The Spurs are defending champs, and the encore is setting up for more of the same. Nearly all of their projected minutes [98 percent] will be played by returners, remarkable considering no other team boasts above a 90 percent retention rate. Yes, they're even creakier—the oldest in the NBA at 30.6 years—but rookie F Kyle Anderson can relieve Boris Diaw and other bigs down low. And don't forget about Leonard, the third-youngest Finals MVP ever at 22. For most teams, bringing back the status quo isn't good enough. But most teams aren't the Spurs. —T.H.



PROJECTED TEAM DEFENSE ▲

1 Led by paint protector Ibaka and his 2.7 bpg, OKC allowed opponents to shoot just 56.6% at the rim last season, the second-best rate in the league.

2 A pack-the-paint defensive strategy leads to the team's main weakness: forcing shooters into the midrange, where OKC ranked just 22nd last season.



3 LOS ANGELES CLIPPERS

WIN PROJECTIONS



PROJECTED STARTERS

Chris Paul [DRtg: 103], J.J. Redick [109], Matt Barnes [106], Blake Griffin [103], DeAndre Jordan [98]

CP30

Doc Rivers' tenure began with a franchise-record 57 wins and a second consecutive Pacific Division title but ended with another second-round loss in the playoffs. The Clips came up short outside, ranking 22nd in 3PT%, so they signed stretch 4 Spencer Hawes [41.6 percent from 3 last season] to provide much-needed spacing for Griffin and Jordan. But Paul, statistically the greatest PG ever, hasn't played close to a full season in three years and turns 30 in May. And Jordan, the team's interior anchor, is a free agent next year. A division title no longer cuts it for the Clippers. —AMIN ELHASSAN



4 PORTLAND TRAIL BLAZERS

WIN PROJECTIONS



PROJECTED STARTERS

Damian Lillard [DRtg: 110], Wesley Matthews [110], Nicolas Batum [106], LaMarcus Aldridge [104], Robin Lopez [107]

HEALTHY TRAILS

Portland enjoyed remarkable health last season—four of its starting five played all 82 games—which led to a massive 21-win improvement from the previous season and the NBA's No. 2-ranked offense. With the return of their hearty starters, sparked by the backcourt of Lillard [116 ORtg] and Matthews [118], the Trail Blazers could challenge to break into the West's top tier, even if their run of good health isn't sustainable. So while we're not saying Portland's bump last season was lucky, we are saying that a slight regression to the mean is to be expected. —K.P.



5 DALLAS MAVERICKS

WIN PROJECTIONS



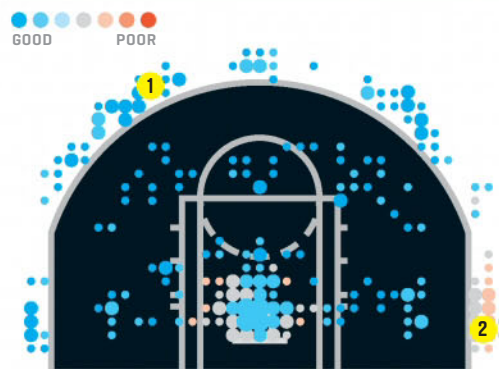
PROJECTED STARTERS

Jameer Nelson [DRtg: 111], Monta Ellis [109], Chandler Parsons [108], Dirk Nowitzki [108], Tyson Chandler [106]

BIG O IN BIG D

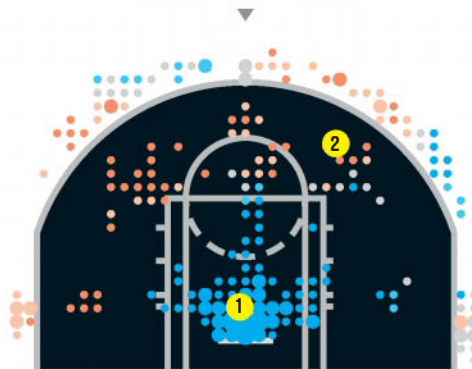
Want a long shot to win the West? The Mavs won 49 games last season and took the Spurs to seven games in the first round. Now they've added Parsons [16.6/5.5/4] as a third weapon to pair with Nowitzki and Ellis. And Chandler, who returns to Dallas after surviving three years in New York, will add much-needed aggressive defense [108.7 points allowed per 100 possessions, 22nd in the NBA]. But the Mavs will contend only if coach Rick Carlisle figures out a rotation for his trio of mediocre 30-something PGs: Nelson, Devin Harris and Raymond Felton. —J.B.

PROJECTED TEAM DEFENSE



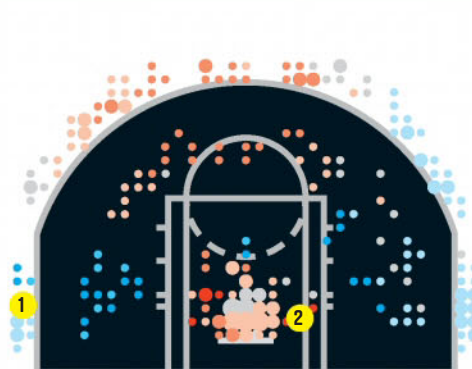
1 The best 3-point D in the NBA last year [33.2%] will again be led by CP3 and Jordan, who haunts guards with his length.

2 The Clippers struggle to defend the left corner, the result of Redick's woes against pick-and-roll schemes.



1 The interior D allowed an elite 56.8% on shots at the basket in '13-14, led by twin trees Lopez and Aldridge, who combined for 2.7 bpg.

2 The team's perimeter defense will suffer in part because Lillard gets crushed on screens, leaving opponents wide open.



1 The Mavs project to put a lid on corner 3s, a Herculean defensive feat considering the tandem of Ellis and Nelson.

2 Chandler, 32, won't impact the team's post D, Dallas' worst spots; it's the midrange where his length will push shots.



6 MEMPHIS GRIZZLIES

WIN PROJECTIONS



PROJECTED STARTERS

Mike Conley [DRtg: 106], Courtney Lee [107], Tayshaun Prince [108], Zach Randolph [105], **Marc Gasol** [102]

NO RANGE FOR ERROR

The biggest challenge for the Grizzlies this offseason was improving their vacant perimeter offense—they ranked 30th in 3s last year. And while the addition of supersub Vince Carter [career 37.8 percent on 3s] will help, the Grizz still give Prince far too many minutes—his minus-1.11 real plus-minus ranked 41st among SFs last season. And SCHOENE projects overall declines for the trio of Conley, Randolph and Gasol. Any stumble will leave the team facing a difficult first-round matchup, if not out of the playoffs altogether. —K.P.



7 GOLDEN STATE WARRIORS

WIN PROJECTIONS



PROJECTED STARTERS

Stephen Curry [DRtg: 104], **Klay Thompson** [106], Andre Iguodala [103], David Lee [103], Andrew Bogut [96]

FITTING THE PIECES

With a backcourt of Curry and Thompson, both of whom shot 42 percent from 3 last year, the offense should improve [12th in offensive rating] under the team's new coach, legendary bomber Steve Kerr. Lee [111 DRtg] is a perfect fit with Bogut down low, and real plus-minus darling Iguodala [No. 3 in the NBA at 6.63] provides solid 3-point shooting as well [35.4 percent]. Even after opting out of the Kevin Love sweepstakes, this team is poised for a surprisingly deep run. But first Kerr needs to unlock the team's enormous scoring potential without sacrificing its lockdown defense. —A.E.



8 HOUSTON ROCKETS

WIN PROJECTIONS



PROJECTED STARTERS

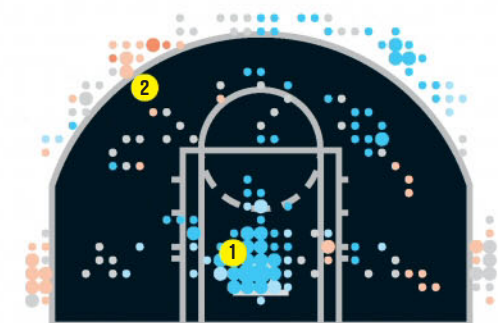
Patrick Beverley [DRtg: 108], James Harden [107], Trevor Ariza [104], Terrence Jones [105], **Dwight Howard** [101]

SCRUBBED LAUNCH

In a failed attempt to land Chris Bosh as a third star to pair with Harden and Howard, the team sacrificed depth, trading both Jeremy Lin and Omer Asik to clear cap space. Worse still, the Rockets lost Chandler Parsons, who went to Dallas via restricted free agency. Still, Harden [120 DRtg] and Howard are an all-league duo, and defensive standout Beverley and rapidly developing Jones [16/9.1 per 36 minutes last year] fill out a dangerous lineup. The Rockets won't be in the 2014-15 title conversation, but they're on the fringe and can push for an impact acquisition next summer. —B.D.

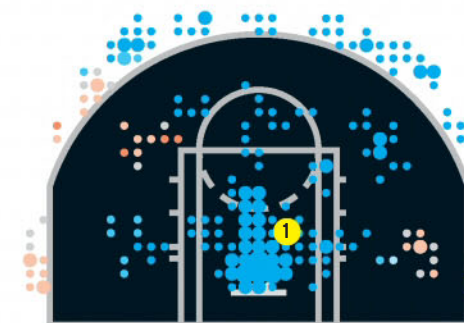
PROJECTED TEAM DEFENSE

GOOD POOR



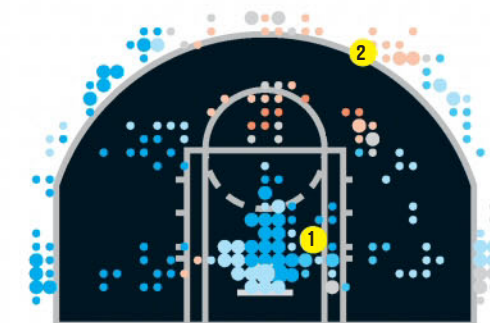
1 Memphis' D hinges on Gasol's interior presence: Opponents produced a terrible 101.7 DRtg with him on the floor last season.

2 Projected as the sixth-best D, the Grizz still struggle on the perimeter, where their wings are slow to extend from midrange.



1 Advice: Avoid the paint, where Bogut lurks. And avoid the arc, where Iguodala and Draymond Green wrest steals.

2 The defense will be stacked [projected fifth best in the NBA], but left-corner 3s remain a weakness [41.1 3PT% against last season].



1 D12 isn't as elite as he used to be [his 101 DRtg last year was his worst since '05-06], but he'll still provide great protection inside.

2 Whatever interior D Howard delivers is offset by Harden, who rates as the 74th-best SG in defensive real plus-minus.



WIN PROJECTIONS

PROJECTED
STARTERS FOR HEAT MAPS OF TEAMS
9-15, VISIT ESPN.COM/NBA
PHOENIX
SUNS45 42.5
ESPN Las
Forecast VegasGoran Dragic
Eric Bledsoe
P.J. Tucker
Markieff Morris
Miles Plumlee

GUARDED OPTIMISM

After shocking the league with a 48-win season in which they overcame below-average rebounding and precisely average D, the Suns added ... wait for it ... perimeter scoring. Free agent PG Isaiah Thomas will back up Dragic [20.3/5.9 last season] and Bledsoe, who signed a five-year, \$70 million deal this offseason. The team also added rookie wing T.J. Warren, who averaged 24.9 ppg at NC State last year. Backcourt cohesion, not to mention a finite number of shots, will be an issue. —A.E.

NEW ORLEANS
PELICANS39 41.5
ESPN Las
Forecast VegasJrue Holiday
Eric Gordon
Tyreke Evans
Anthony Davis
Omer Asik

TOO YOUNG TO RIDE

The Pelicans have arguably the best defensive frontcourt in the NBA, with newly acquired Asik [103 DRTg] at center alongside budding superstar Davis, who at 21 averaged 20.8/10 and a league-leading 2.8 blocks per game. And their offense should be significantly better with clean bills of health for point guard Holiday and stretch 4 Ryan Anderson. But with the frail Gordon and inefficient Evans [103 DRTg] still garnering big minutes, the Pels—the second-youngest team in the West—will be on the outside looking in on the playoffs. —A.E.

DENVER
NUGGETS38 40.5
ESPN Las
Forecast VegasTy Lawson
Arron Afflalo
Danilo Gallinari
Kenneth Faried
JaVale McGee

HEAVEN IS TOO FAR AWAY

With the return of Afflalo, who regressed to an average player [107 DRTg] during his two-year exile in Orlando, Denver has reunited the starting five from the 2011-12 team that went 38-28 after the lockout. The Nuggets project to have the seventh-best offense, led by Gallinari, who shot 37 percent from 3 and produced a terrific 116 DRTg in 2012-13. But their D projects to 24th. So once again they'll be just talented enough to compete for the playoffs but not bad enough to begin a rebuild. Purgatory looks a lot like Denver. —K.P.

LOS ANGELES
LAKERS30 31.5
ESPN Las
Forecast VegasJeremy Lin
Kobe Bryant
Wesley Johnson
Carlos Boozer
Jordan Hill

SLOWTIME

During the offseason, the Lakers lost Pau Gasol, who still produced [17.4/9.7/3.4] despite playing with Nick Young, Johnson and 83-year-old Steve Nash. To compensate, the team signed the ever inefficient Carlos Boozer and re-upped with board banger Hill. Even at 36, Bryant will provide an offensive spark, but not enough to stop coach Byron Scott from leading a march to the bottom, where even LA's 2015 first-rounder isn't assured: It goes to the Suns if it falls outside the top five. Welcome to the cellar, Laker Nation. —A.E.

SACRAMENTO
KINGS29 30.5
ESPN Las
Forecast VegasDarren Collison
Ben McLemore
Rudy Gay
Jason Thompson
DeMarcus Cousins

A KING'S UNEVEN COURT

It will be up to Cousins, 24, if the Kings hope to end their eight-season playoff drought. The recently minted gold medalist averaged a ridiculous 22.7/11.7/2.9 last season and produced a PER of 26.1, the fifth-best rate in basketball and nearly six points above second gun Isaiah Thomas. But replacing spark plug PG Thomas with the aging Darren Collison this offseason was universally (and rightfully) panned, and the team projects to have the league's 19th-best defense and 22nd-best offense. Stay thirsty, my friends. —A.E.

UTAH
JAZZ26 25.5
ESPN Las
Forecast VegasTrey Burke
Alec Burks
Gordon Hayward
Derrick Favors
Enes Kanter

WORKS IN PROGRESS

With six players in the rotation under age 25, Utah is more about development than wins. The young core of PF Favors [13.3/8.7] and SF Hayward (one of only five NBA players to average 16/5/5) must embrace the more schematic focus of new coach Quin Snyder. And if talented 19-year-old rookie Dante Exum contributes right away, the Jazz have a chance at 30 wins. But for now, the bigger issue is sorting through the roster to determine which youngsters are part of the future and which are replaceable. —K.P.

MINNESOTA
T-WOLVES26 25.5
ESPN Las
Forecast VegasRicky Rubio
Kevin Martin
Corey Brewer
Thaddeus Young
Nikola Pekovic

A LONG, COLD WINTER

Trying to rebuild while competing for a playoff spot is virtually impossible. Without Kevin Love, the Timberwolves have little chance to match last season's 40 wins, let alone improve enough to make the playoffs. Young is solid (projected WARP of 6.2) but still a major downgrade at power forward. And the duo of Rubio and No. 1 overall pick Andrew Wiggins, while young and exciting and dunk-happy, projects to shoot an ice-cold 42.5 percent on 2s and 32.1 percent on 3s. —K.P.

RAGE AGAINST THE MACHINES

We compared results from two projection systems—Jeremias Engelmann and Stephen Ilardi's real plus-minus and Kevin Pelton's SCHOENE—to see if they would achieve consensus. When they disagreed (damn you, tiny thinking boxes!), we asked their creators why.

PROJECTED WINS ● Real plus-minus ● SCHOENE



1 Chandler helps a D ranked 22nd, while Parsons and Nelson add to a potent O.

Due to Dirk's age (36), expect an eight-spot drop in offense (third to 11th).

2 Carter (4.5 RPM) and a healthy Gasol return Grizz to the 50-win club.

A 16th-ranked O drops to 24th due to declines from Gasol, Z-Bo and Conley.

3 Starting five is elite but injury-prone, especially Curry and Bogut.

A strong drop in production from Lee, 31, results in the 47.8 wins projection.

1 Varejao is a variable: Cavs could win 60 if he's healthy.

Really, 68.3 wins? SCHOENE may be too high on Love's D.

2 Starters rate as average, but the bench is weak.

Hornets' D improves again, up to No. 3 in the NBA.

3 Deng (3 RPM) and McRoberts (1) keep Heat hot[ish].

Without LeBron inside, the defense falls to 15th.

4 RPM undersells Van Gundy; he's worth seven W's.

Key: Smith has 94% chance of playing better this season.

ESPN THE PREDICTIONS

Our in-house hoops poll, aka ESPN NBA Forecast, goes out on a limb to say **THE SPURS WILL REPEAT AS CHAMPIONS**. But what do some of our individual voters think? Well, let's just say their picks don't fall far from the high-seeded tree.

	J.A. Adande	Chris Broussard	Tom Haberstroh	Tim Legler	Kevin Pelton	Ramona Shelburne	Marc Stein
NBA Finals forecast	Thunder over Cavaliers	Cavaliers over Thunder	Spurs over Cavaliers	Spurs over Cavaliers	Cavaliers over Clippers	Spurs over Cavaliers	Cavaliers over Thunder
MVP	Kevin Durant	LeBron James	LeBron James	LeBron James	LeBron James	LeBron James	LeBron James
ROY	Jabari Parker	Jabari Parker	Jabari Parker	Jabari Parker	Jabari Parker	Jabari Parker	Jabari Parker
COY	Dwane Casey	David Blatt	Steve Clifford	Erik Spoelstra	Stan Van Gundy	Tom Thibodeau	Mike Budenholzer
DPOY	Serge Ibaka	Serge Ibaka	Andrew Bogut	Anthony Davis	Joakim Noah	Anthony Davis	Dwight Howard
Biggest soap opera [player]	Rajon Rondo	Roy Hibbert	Kobe Bryant	Dwight Howard	J.R. Smith	Kobe Bryant	Rajon Rondo

INVASION OF THE BODY TESTERS

NBA

THE PLAYERS' COMING BATTLE
WITH NBA OWNERS WILL BE WAGED
NOT JUST OVER THE BOTTOM
LINE—BUT OVER INCREASINGLY
ADVANCED BIOMETRIC TESTING.

BY PABLO S. TORRE AND TOM HABERSTROH
ILLUSTRATION BY VIKTOR KOEN



NBA 2014-15

MORE THAN ANY OTHER LEAGUE IN AMERICAN SPORTS,

the NBA is an aspirational technocracy. Adam Silver, its flowchart-savvy new commissioner, travels the country championing analytics and innovation. The D-League functions not only as the game's minor leagues but also, per the NBA's official phraseology, as its "research and development laboratory." And with the August sale of the Clippers to former Microsoft CEO Steve Ballmer, about 1 in 3 majority owners in the NBA can now trace their billions to the tech industry.

So perhaps it shouldn't come as a surprise that Silicon Valley is transforming how teams scrutinize, optimize and fundamentally think about their players—or that Dr. Leslie Saxon, executive director of the Center for Body Computing at the University of Southern California, contends that the NBA is leading society into the biometric revolution. "We've been inundated with all these companies coming up with different things to look at and test," says Gregg Farnam, longtime Timberwolves trainer and the chairman of

the National Basketball Athletic Trainers Association. "It's the explosion of data and data collection."

But what might come as a surprise is how significant that explosion has been and how far its blast radius might soon reach. The literary specter haunting sports' burgeoning Information Age is no longer Michael Lewis and *Moneyball* but George Orwell and *1984*.

The boom officially began during work hours. Before last season, all 30 arenas installed sets of six military-grade cameras, built by a firm called SportVU, to record the x- and y-coordinates of every person on the court at a rate of 25 times a second—a technology originally developed for missile defense in Israel. This past spring, SportVU partnered with Catapult, an Australian company that produces wearable GPS trackers that can gauge fatigue levels during physical activity. Catapult counts a baker's dozen of NBA clients, including the exhaustion-conscious Spurs, and claims Mavericks owner Mark Cuban as both a customer and an investor. To front offices, the upside of such devices is rather obvious: Players, like Formula One cars, are luxury machines that perform best if vigilantly monitored, regulated and maintained.

But to follow this logic to its conclusion is to understand why the scope of this monitoring is expanding, and faster than the public knows. Teams have always intuited that on-court productivity could be undermined by off-court choices—how a player exhausts himself after hours, for instance, or what he eats and drinks. Now the race is on to comprehensively surveil and quantify that behavior. NBA executives have discovered how to leverage new, ever-shrinking technologies to supervise a player's sleeping habits, record his physical movements, appraise his diet and test his blood. In automotive terms, the league is investing in more accurate telemetry.

"We need to be able to have impact on these players in their private time," says Kings general manager Pete D'Alessandro. "It doesn't have to be us vs. you. It can be a partnership."

A lovely sentiment, at least in theory. But how long will it be until biometric details impact contract negotiations? How long until graphs of off-court behavior are leaked to other teams or the media? How long until employment hinges on embracing technology that some players find invasive?

"Employers dictating the health care of their employees is a conflict of interest that cannot be overcome," says Alan C. Milstein, a leading bioethics attorney and sports litigator who often represents NBA players. "I just refuse to believe that the purpose of monitoring on any long-term basis is the health of the employee. If the purpose is to predict performance, that's not a health care purpose. That's an economic purpose."

No complaints have been filed to the National Basketball Players Association as of yet. But it is worth noting that these partnerships have developed so quietly that the union had not even developed a position on the concept until ESPN requested comment in August. "If the league and teams want to discuss potentially invasive testing procedures that relate to performance, they're free to start that dialogue and we'll be glad to weigh the benefits against the risks," says longtime NBPA



net

While Andre Iguodala sleeps more—and plays better—by choice, one of Cuban's Mavs says he feels like a lab rat.



counsel Ron Klempner, who served as interim executive director from February 2013 to September 2014. “Obviously, we’d have serious privacy and other fairness concerns on behalf of the players. We’ve barely left the starting line on these issues.”

Actually, the race is well underway.

ANDRE IGUODALA’S TV used to cackle into the early morning, the laugh track of *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* echoing in the semidarkness

of his master bedroom. For years, this was the All-Star swingman’s postmidnight routine: Watch reruns around 2 a.m.; pass out around 4; wake up around 8; drag self to gym; repeat. Iguodala traces the insomnia back to the University of Arizona, where he’d toss and turn over his pro future. But it was only last season, with his 30th birthday staring him in the face, that the newly hired Warrior surrendered his problem to an employer. “I told them that I needed to see a sleep therapist ASAP,” Iguodala

says. “And it’s funny: Keke told me he’d been thinking about the same thing.”

Keke Lyles, Golden State’s director of athletic performance, had already been researching what amounts to an open secret about NBA slumber: Players sleep as lightly as undergrads during finals week but nap harder than Spanish plutocrats. Iguodala’s typical game-day siestas, for example, ran three to four hours. “Even if they’ve been out all night,” says Grizzlies trainer Drew Graham, “most of them take naps and think that’s enough. They see the other guys do it.”

The problem with that strategy, however, is quantifiable. A Stanford School of Medicine study of 11 men’s basketball players, published in the journal *Sleep* in 2011, found that getting 10 hours a night not only reduced fatigue and injury risk but also improved accuracy at the foul line (by 9 percent) and behind the arc (by 9.2 percent). More recently, at the Sloan Sports Analytics Conference in March, front office execs heard a Harvard Medical School professor declare that a 25-year-old who sleeps four hours a night for one week possesses the degraded testosterone levels of someone who’s 36. “If you told an athlete you had a treatment that would reduce the chemicals associated with stress, that would naturally increase human growth hormone, that enhances recovery rate, that improves performance, they would all do it,” says Mavericks trainer Casey Smith. “Sleep does all of those things.”

So it was last season that Iguodala became one of several Warriors to wear the UP by Jawbone, a rubber-coated wristband weighing less than an ounce that monitors sleep habits by tracking the arm’s slightest movements. Before the availability of such devices—and the ensuing graphs illustrating quantity and quality of sleep—teams could gather data only from questionnaires. “And one thing we’ve found out,” Lyles says, “is that guys who used to say that they got nine hours of sleep every night actually got more like five.” Iguodala also agreed to a no-screens-in-bed policy under Lyles and now bans his beloved TV from his

\$10M

The average amount of guaranteed money NBA teams lose per year to injuries.

bedroom. He stores his cellphone in the bathroom overnight. He keeps the temperature at precisely 57 degrees, to lower his body's core temperature. His game-day naps have been cut down to an hour. His new in-season routine, which begins at 11:15 p.m., proceeds as follows: Stretch; do breathing exercises; read a book for 15 to 20 minutes; lights out by midnight; repeat. Iguodala attests to feeling "more refreshed and not as groggy."

"Once guys get a feeling for performing at a higher level," says Jeremy Holsoption, the Mavericks' athletic-performance director, "it's a big difference from feeling like s---. Which they didn't even think was feeling like s---."

Dallas managed its own sleep program last season, inspecting rest in two-week blocks with a motion-detecting watch called a Readiband. Five franchises—three of them playoff teams—also persuaded players to wear a skin-adhesive, torso-mounted sensor that is colloquially known within front offices as "the patch." The device tracks sleep habits but also skin temperature, body position and heart-rate variability (which is linked to stress). As a result, the patch can discern when a player pulls on the covers at night, when he lies down, when his pulse races and—thanks to alcohol's observable effect on

heartbeat—when he passes out drunk.

If it sounds like the technocratic normalizing of surveillance, it is. "It's part of a growing trend of employers trying to take a peek into personal lives," says Dr. Arthur L. Caplan, the director of New York University's medical ethics division and the co-director of its sports and society program. "But there are slippery-slope risks. Goals can easily slide from improving performance to preventing you from putting yourself at risk to making sure you don't do anything to embarrass the team. I'd be very, very cautious."

Yes, Iguodala, a star veteran with a \$48 million contract, may now feel confident experimenting with sleep under the guidance of the Warriors. But what happens later, as the program becomes more established and a scrub is presented with the choice to volunteer? "Voluntary" is a must, and I'm sure some teams mean it," Caplan says. "But there's still a huge difference in job security between a superstar and a marginal player. If you're the 12th guy on an NBA bench, you probably don't feel quite as free to say no."

JEREMY HOLSOPTION IS standing on the third floor of Chicago's Palmer House Hilton on a

bright May afternoon. The National Basketball Strength and Conditioning Association's annual vendor show is in full swing, and all around him, 39 companies flash terms like "astronaut-tested," "body-scanning" and "cell systems." At one table, Alex McKechnie, the Raptors' assistant coach and director of sports science, grouches about user interface with an inventor of heart monitors. At another, Bryan Doo, the Celtics' strength-and-conditioning coach, inquires about a headset that interprets electrochemical brain activity. But what most intrigues Holsoption, entering his second season in Dallas, is relatively simple.

"Fatigue and load are the biggest things we're looking at right now," he says. "I think you can honestly say that teams lose 10 to 15 games a year because players aren't even remotely close to physical and mental freshness."



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If SportVU cameras and GPS trackers have proved anything about on-court behavior, it's that basketball time is hardly created equal. A minute of Thunder guard Russell Westbrook, who starts and stops like a Lamborghini in the open floor, is nothing like a minute of center Kendrick Perkins, a moving van who all but beeps while backing into the paint. The true load exacted on a player's body is a physics equation that varies based on mass, distance, speed and acceleration. And it applies whenever they are doing anything, anywhere; a power forward who takes boxing lessons after work unmistakably adds to the cumulative fatigue on his body. "Practice is only part of a 24-hour day," says Lyles. "Solely using that as our gauge for how much or how little we should be doing with guys probably isn't a very good way to do it."

Enter the patch, made by Proteus Digital Health. Far more than just a sleep monitor, it also boasts the capacity to continuously collect accelerometer data—and wirelessly transmit them onto a team-owned phone or computer. Weighing 9.5 grams, the gray 4-inch oval can

be stuck to the skin and forgotten about in the process. Todd Thompson, Proteus' VP of corporate development, contends that without the patch's access to and analysis of off-court player movements, any coaching staff that adjusts practice intensities and

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travel schedules does so on perilously incomplete information.

Imagine an NBA season as a horizontal graph of the load on a player's body, dotted with strategically chosen peaks (for games of the utmost importance) and valleys (where rest is necessary to lower the odds of injury). Imagine the capacity to generate an all-encompassing version of that graph, down to the hour a player tired himself out chasing his kids in his backyard—or did something significantly less family-friendly. Imagine a sortable chart that lists, for each rung of the depth chart, a color-coded number representing current overall fatigue level. The market for that kind of risk-management solution is self-evident.

"General managers, owners, presidents, they're all looking at how much money they're losing due to sports injuries," says Suns trainer Aaron Nelson. According to a recent study by Rotowire, the average NBA team hemorrhages about \$10 million in guaranteed salary per year from games missed due to injury alone. This makes fatigue, which directly relates to the twin dangers of overexertion and soft-tissue damage, a chief threat to playoff chances and literal fortunes.

But with a big enough cache of data? A training staff could generate algorithmically individualized prescriptions for rest and movement. It could act pre-emptively, based on probability on top of past results. "The more we can objectify what guys are doing," Lyles says, "the more accurately we can make recommendations or change what we do."

Change what they do—as in benching a starter before he suffers a projected injury. Or trading him away for that same reason. Or cutting a backup because of a suspiciously consistent spike in fatigue level after 2 in the morning on road trips. In which case each player should answer a question that everyone, regardless of occupation, might soon consider for themselves: Would you be better served, economically, by your employer's knowing more or less?

"They'll bring guys in and work them out and

be able to see if they're at a bigger risk to hurt their knee or whatever," says Mavericks forward Brandan Wright.

And when it comes to contract negotiations? "Honestly, I think it'll hurt guys," Wright continues. "I think that's where it's headed."

THE SPECTRUM OF NBA lifestyles is contained within one 12-foot stretch of the Heat locker room on a March afternoon last season. On one end, Ray Allen is explaining how he can no longer drink soda without gagging. Seriously. The 39-year-old has gone paleo, meaning the guard eats mostly lean meats, fish, nuts, vegetables and fruit. All of three lockers away stands 25-year-old journeyman Michael Beasley, whose culinary approach involves emptying a 41-ounce bag of Tropical Skittles into his mouth like a cement mixer filling a ditch.

Allen eagerly embraces food as fuel for the machine. But in the tradition of fellow pros such as Pistons forward Caron Butler—who once kept six fridges full of Mountain Dew at home and drank a liter of it over the course of every game—Beasley might be an equally established basketball archetype. Which is conspicuously suboptimal.

"A lot of guys think they can get away with it," says Graham, the Grizzlies' trainer. "I'll still get bitched at because I'm like, 'I'm not giving you chicken wings.'"

What players choose to put inside their bodies has long been an agenda item inside locker rooms. Many teams, in fact, supply meals at work. Sixers trainer Kevin N. Johnson even organizes color-coded eating groups, sorted by whose weight needs to rise (red), maintain (white) or drop (blue). But the precision of any dietary profile is hampered without knowledge of the way particular foods interact with particular bodies. And the barrier to that information is the drawing of blood: a ubiquitous practice in the English Premier League but one typically found in American sports only as part of lab work for a regular physical.

Unless, of course, you happen to play for a

**"I DON'T TRUST WHERE
MY BLOOD SAMPLE WILL
END UP AND WHAT
EYES WILL LOOK AT IT."**

—FORMER NBA PLAYER SHANE BATTIER

team like the Mavericks. "I think the smartest thing we do for health from a data perspective," says Cuban, "is take ongoing assessments and even blood tests so we have a baseline for each individual that we can monitor for any abnormalities. When someone is ill, we know what their numbers should be."

The Mavs are adamant: They have not done—or asked their players to do—anything illicit in the administration of these tests and the handling of the resulting samples. Still, granting any extra permission to a vein requires trust that an employer will analyze only what you ask it to detect. It requires trust that possible financial incentives to run in-season tests for a battery of performance-related substances and conditions—anything from marijuana to hormones to herpes—will be ignored. "I'm not saying it's bad for a topflight athlete to be monitored," says Caplan, the NYU bioethicist. "But a team physician, I'm constantly reminded, is conflicted."

When asked by ESPN to elaborate on blood analysis, Cuban declined further comment. But interviews with several Dallas players indicate that the team's expanded testing policy is neither obvious nor rosterwide. Guard Devin Harris recalls giving blood only in the preseason as part of the standard team physical; perhaps by design, other plasma-related details remain vague. "I don't know what they do with it once they have it, but they definitely take it," Harris says. "And I know they talked about taking blood throughout the season for certain stuff."

In the field of nutritional analysis, the payoff for a blood draw comes when a company such as Cell Science Systems—in attendance at the NBSCA vendor show—generates a one-page, color-coded report that indicates whether a player has any debilitating food allergies or

sensitivities to any of 100 specific foods. A universe of dining threats is identified. A parallel test can also be run for allergies to tattoo ink, which one Western Conference executive says were discovered in the case of at least one unknowingly poison-decorated player.

THERE IS ANOTHER, decidedly less generous, view of where this road goes, however. And one day last spring, after logging 13 years in the league, a teammate of Allen's and Beasley's declared that the increase in biological testing played a role in his decision to bow out of the business altogether. "I think all fluids will be extracted in five years," forward Shane Battier said three months before officially announcing his retirement. "I'm glad I'm done." Battier granted that certain archetypes—your Allens, your Iguodalas—might be perfectly willing to revamp their private lives in the service of basketball. But, he continued, "big data is scary because you don't know where it's going and who has seen it. I'm not saying that they'd sell research to anyone, but I don't trust where my blood sample will end up and what eyes will look at it and what people outside the NBA will know about it."

Mind you: This is *Shane Battier* talking, a 36-year-old guy whose vices lately include pizza and a carafe of Scarecrow cabernet before bed; he's hardly the type of libertine to employ a Whizzinator to pass a drug test. Regardless, the very notion of evading detection may soon be obsolete. Saxon, of USC's Center for Body Computing, is in the planning stages of an invention that would render Whizzinator-esque technologies moot. Her vision? "Minimally invasive implantables," Saxon says, sounding genuinely excited. "Injectable, stays in the body for a year or two. No fuss." She can imagine the

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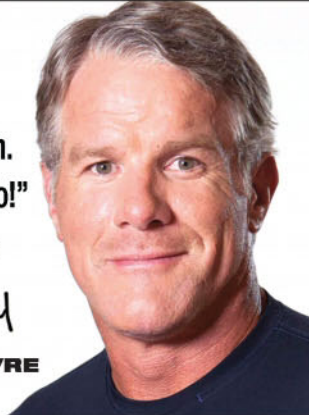
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device feeding key biometric information to your phone. Automated directions—the equivalent of your new car telling you to fill up the tank—would then pop up as alerts.

“If they ask me to put a chip in my body, I don’t know about that,” Brandan Wright says. “I don’t want to be a complete lab rat. I already feel like one now. I don’t want to take it to the next level.” Or, as Mavericks center Tyson Chandler, who won a championship with Dallas in 2011, puts it, “I’m not down with the alien stuff.” Chandler, 32, might well retire before the “alien stuff” comes to pass. But if so, he’ll likely have to do so soon.

“We want to be one step beyond what anyone else is doing,” says Kings owner Vivek Ranadive, whose personal fortune was built on the comprehensive digitization of Wall Street. “Amazingly, what banks and trading floors were 20 years ago, sports is now. The stakes are huge, and we can act quickly.” Just listen to his GM, who is thinking far deeper than mere skin. “The holy grail,” D’Alessandro says, “is sequencing and understanding the genome. And how that relates to pro athletes on an injury basis and who’s naturally good at certain sports.” As part of D’Alessandro’s mandate with the Kings, he’s consulted scientists about one day building a vast predraft database of player DNA—not just for evaluation but for gauging injury risks and prevention. “You wouldn’t have to be identified as a person,” he says. “You could be identified as a number. I don’t suspect this will happen in our lifetimes. But the way things have proliferated scientifically? Maybe it will.”

History predicts serious pushback. In 2005, Alan Milstein represented Eddy Curry against the Bulls, whose management wanted the center to submit to genetic screening because of an irregular heartbeat. (Curry was eventually traded to the Knicks, bypassing the issue.) The core objection then, as now, was that genetic markers are not actual proof of alcoholism, or Alzheimer’s, or cancer; they just signal greater odds of developing those conditions. In fact, as of the 2008 passing of the Genetic Information Nondiscrimination Act, it is illegal for employ-

ers to discriminate based on genetic information for that very reason. Choosing to privilege reality over probability in that way, Milstein notes, “was one of the few situations where Congress was actually unanimous.”

In their defense, NBA execs, team staffers and inventors do seem to recognize these fears and offer counterarguments without being prompted. Graham stresses that his interest as a trainer isn’t to find out how his players entertain themselves at night, although that information may well cross his transom—it’s to make them healthier and maximize their careers. Holsoapple, meanwhile, goes so far as to make Mavericks players an explicit promise before sensitive monitoring takes place. “I tell them that nobody sees the data but me and the people directly on staff that work for me,” he says. The coaching staff, on the other hand, “will get what they need to make decisions as coaches. But we will not give them the things that players can be judged upon.”

Such is the line, precarious as it is, that NBA teams are pledging to walk. And such is the line that players, whose union will have biometrics on its list of priorities during collective-bargaining-agreement talks in 2017, might ultimately refuse. But to hear the proponents of this revolution tell it, they’re not so much sprinting toward Orwell as they are grinding their way to incremental improvements. “That’s what the reality is,” Lyles says. “We want to fine-tune things. If we do little tweaks here and there, maybe a guy doesn’t pull his hamstring.” Or maybe, at the end of the fourth quarter, a foul defending a game-winning shot instead becomes a block.

That much optimization, the upside of so much technocracy, is the carrot currently incentivizing the 30-year-old Iguodala as he staves off departure from the game he dearly loves. In the meantime? “I just hope we don’t become robots,” Iguodala says, “where they’re feeding us the same thing, every day, and then it’s time to flip the switch and go to sleep.”

That, after all, would be a different game entirely. ■

20-SECOND TIMEOUT

ESPN’S NBA FRONT OFFICE—OUR WAR ROOM OF TOP NBA MINDS—WILL DEBATE ALMOST ANYTHING. THE TOPIC FOR THIS 20:

WHICH PLAYER IS SQUANDERING HIS TALENT THE MOST?

DIRECTOR OF ANALYTICS KEVIN PELTON: Michael Beasley. I think there are some physical issues with him being a tweener, but his two main problems are that he doesn’t understand what a good shot is and his consistent lack of focus.

ASSISTANT GM CHAD FORD: I would say DeMarcus Cousins. He could be one of the best players in the NBA if he were mentally in the right place. He was 127th in the league in real plus-minus last season but could be in the top five ...

GM TOM PENN: And even in the world championship, you still saw that hair-trigger temper from Cousins. But for me, J.R. Smith is the captain of the all-knucklehead team. Lance Stephenson is your co-captain, but at least he performs. J.R. just fell off the shelf. So ...

THE FINAL ANSWER

J.R. SMITH

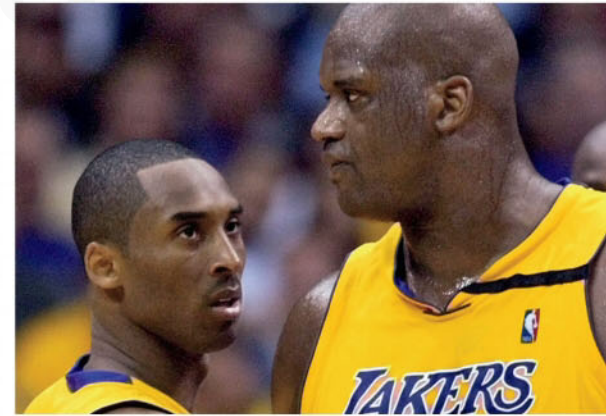


KOBE

HE IS ARGUABLY THE GREATEST
PLAYER IN THE HISTORY OF THE
LAKERS FRANCHISE. HE IS ALSO
DESTROYING IT FROM WITHIN.

BY HENRY ABBOTT

From Shaq to Bynum to Gasol to Howard, Kobe has saved his hardest looks for the biggest men—and received his share in return.



out of the hat. But since the night of Fisher's explosive delight, the squad's most stunning trick has been in how completely and quickly it turned the NBA's show-pony franchise into a goat, ranked 28th in ESPN's most recent Future Power Rankings. Four years, five coaches, three early playoff flameouts, two key departed big men, one celebrated owner deceased. The Lakers have been in near free fall.

It would seem that the only connection fans have to the Lakers' title tradition is Bryant, the man who helped make the franchise one of the most popular brands in sports. Now 36, he's a lock to have his statue outside Staples Center someday. He's the reason celebrities line up 10 deep inside. He's also, say sources both in and around the Lakers' organization, the primary reason the team has fallen so mightily.

For years the Lakers lived by the Mamba. This is the story of how they're dying by him.

LAKERS GM MITCH KUPCHAK knew he had work to do. In the afterglow of that 2010 title, as Fisher played town crier in the bowels of Staples Center, Kupchak was game-planning the future. A 60-year-old Lakers lifer and a member of the team's front office since 1986, Kupchak keeps a studiously low profile but is a savvy veteran of the politics that come with his position. And he knew then that for all that glittered around the Lakers, mere actuarial tables dictated that a day would come when they would need their next superstar. Bryant, a monomaniacal beast, had forced his body through untold workouts, rehabs, surgeries and medical innovations. But time is a bastard; even Kobe could not make it stand still. So Kupchak wanted to be ready with options whenever Lakers owner Jerry Buss declared it was time to pass the torch from Bryant.

Kupchak knew how the dance was done. With maybe a dozen true basketball superstars on the planet, and 30 teams vying for them, the operating principle of your typical rebuilding NBA team is to pray for the miracle of landing a superstar. For the Lakers, though, that math has long been different. Better.

Consider how they acquired Bryant. In 1996, the Lakers had determined that the brash high

schooler with the Italian upbringing was the jewel of the draft. Still, they didn't have a draft pick anywhere near high enough to get him. So they did what they've always done and exploited the fact that they have a legendary franchise in a city that works miracles for the lifestyles and incomes of players and their agents. Whereas Bryant flew to LA for a private predraft workout to ensure that Jerry West and the Lakers were aware of his skills, he refused to show his stuff to small-market teams like the Charlotte Hornets. Arn Tellem, his agent at the time, made it clear that Bryant didn't want to play in a small market. Combined with Bryant's lack of college pedigree, it was enough to scare off many teams, and a deal was ultimately worked out: The Hornets would take Bryant with the 13th pick and trade him to LA for proven center Vlade Divac.

The Lakers had their man.

It's a common story: The best players have always pulled every string they can to get to LA, from Kareem Abdul-Jabbar to Magic Johnson to Shaquille O'Neal. And so four years ago, the Lakers' plan was to unlock the door to Staples Center and let the NBA's talent vie for the right to don the purple and gold. By 2012, executive VP Jim Buss made clear that the preferred avenue by which those stars would arrive was 2014 free agency. "We put everything to that," Buss told the *Orange County Register's* Kevin Ding. "And we want to make a big splash in the free agent market if we get to that spot. So we designed the contracts and the players and our future all around that." Kupchak would have several of the team's contracts end at the same time that players like LeBron James and Paul George were due to become free agents. Until then, he would be aggressive with a plan to trade for the cornerstones of a next generation, talents like Chris Paul and Dwight Howard. For good measure, the team would retain its pick in the celebrated 2014 draft. The Lakers would have a chance to draft a superstar, the assets to

NOT LONG AFTER the final horn of Game 7 of the 2010 Finals, Champagne-soaked Lakers captain Derek Fisher, who carries a reputation as an NBA stoic, screamed with glee. "We just gettin' started, baby!" he bellowed from beneath his freshly minted back-to-back-title cap. In case anyone missed it, he hollered again. "We just gettin' started, bay-beeee!"

It wasn't merely the bubbly talking. The Lakers had, by most measures, the best coach and owner in history. They started a legend at shooting guard in 31-year-old Kobe Bryant, along with All-Star Pau Gasol and future All-Star Andrew Bynum. Everyone's ages and contracts implied the team could keep right on winning—more or less as the Lakers always had. That year, John Hollinger rated LA the NBA's top franchise, writing on ESPN.com: "When it comes to superstars, the Lakers are so far out in front of everybody else it's not even funny."

Fisher looked at the Lakers then as we all did: From Wilt to Kareem to Shaq to Pau, they were the team that could always pull one more star



get one or two by trade or the cap room to lure one or two players with max contracts in the summer of 2014 or 2015.

"They have probably been planning for their next phase for a while," a rival GM told ESPN's Brian Windhorst. "The Busses and Mitch are always thinking about the next big deal."

Then came the troubles. After coach Phil Jackson's departure in 2011, the Lakers' winning percentage began a slide (.695 to .621 to .549) that would end in a crater (.329). And when LA sent out feelers in the run-up to 2014 free agency, the feedback came in the form of crickets. LeBron, approached first, was unreachable. When the Lakers turned their attention to George—a rising star who grew up in LA County idolizing Bryant—he re-upped with the Pacers. So the Lakers kept spinning their lazy Susan of free agent superstar dreams. Kevin Love? Carmelo Anthony? Chris Bosh? Not one would take the Lakers' money—or fight his way to LA. Kupchak, rather presciently, began preparing fans for the idea that the cap space of the upcoming years might not result in a big name, telling ESPN's Colin Cowherd in late 2013, "I don't know if we'll get a star player," while pointing out that there are "a lot of things you can do with cap room" besides sign a big name.

It seemed something—or someone—was scuttling the Lakers' quest for a future franchise talent.

REMEMBER RAMON SESSIONS? In the spring of 2012, after a trade from Cleveland, the pick-and-roll specialist was briefly the toast of LA, widely hailed as the post-Fisher point guard needed to steady the Lakers' ship. Sessions filled the role admirably, for a stretch, before a poor playoff performance. If you haven't heard his name in a while it's because when faced with the option of returning to the Lakers, quite possibly as a starter, he declined.

The deal Sessions signed instead was longer,

and therefore came with more job security. But it was to back up Kemba Walker on the *Bobcats*, who were coming off literally the worst season in league history. Sessions has been somewhat evasive as to why, but he has been quoted as saying it was "definitely different" playing with Bryant. Internally, the Lakers were rattled by his departure and came to believe that Kobe was the key. It meant little as a transaction but everything as a sign of how players with options view this team.

"Peek behind the banners," says one longtime NBA agent, "and it's rotten."

"Kobe is like the big rock in their front yard," says an agent who has had a Lakers client in recent years. "You can't mow over it, so you just have to mow around it."

Another agent with current Lakers clients was asked whether Bryant undermined the team's rebuilding by alienating would-be free agent recruits. "Well, *duh*," he replied. "Isn't that obvious?"

IF ONE COMMON denominator has persisted throughout Bryant's tenure with the Lakers, it

**"I'VE HAD A LOT OF CLIENTS WHO
DIDN'T WANT TO PLAY WITH KOBE.
THEY SEE THAT HIS TEAMMATES
BECOME THE CHRONIC
PUBLIC WHIPPING BOYS."
—PROMINENT NBA AGENT**

is this: The blame lands elsewhere, and usually with teammates. O'Neal—at times a mentor to Bryant, at other times freestyle-rapping to a packed club in Manhattan, "Yo, Kobe, tell me how my ass taste"—is one in a long line of Bryant's teammates who've struggled to stick to a single script in describing the singular man. Bynum, Gasol and Howard have each been at turns coy, reticent, warm or biting. And, in turn, each has taken massive doses of blame in the media without Bryant meaningfully coming to their rescue.

"I've had a lot of clients in the last five years, good players, who didn't want to play with Kobe," says an agent who has had numerous NBA stars. "They see that his teammates become the chronic public whipping boys. Anyone who could possibly challenge Kobe for the spotlight ends up becoming a pincushion for the media. Even Shaq."

Sometimes the words come straight from Bryant's mouth, like when Bryant told Jim Gray in 2003 that O'Neal—a perennial MVP candidate and repeat champion—was "fat and out of shape" and intimated that Shaq threatened to

play defense only when the offense suited him. More often, Bryant sidekicks have been assailed by stories attributed to “sources” on the team. Bryant-as-truth-teller is how it’s typically framed, but few around the NBA see it that way. More common is the assessment that he undermines anyone who threatens his supremacy. One Lakers insider remembers a time in 2012 when Bynum—about a year after declaring that the Lakers had on-court “trust issues”—was due for a contract extension: “Andrew’s question in contract talks was: ‘How are you going to rein in Kobe?’ We couldn’t give direct answers. My immediate thought was, *Well, he doesn’t want to play with Kobe if we can’t answer that question.*”

“I just never felt like the Lakers put as much effort into the building-the-team part of it,” says an agent who once had a free agent decline a Lakers offer. “I saw some things in the players’ parking lot. Conversations between Bynum and his people and some people with the Lakers. It got pretty rough and heated.”

“It’s horrendous. It’s evil. It’s a hard drug to quit when you’re winning,” says a front office executive from a rival team who knows everyone involved well. “Kobe has cost the Lakers dearly in human capital. Kobe has hurt a lot of people. In some cases jeopardized careers.”

IN JULY 2013, after one tumultuous season in LA, Dwight Howard had reached free agency

with a flood of carefully arranged meetings with the Rockets, Hawks, Mavericks, Warriors and Lakers. For the Lakers, it was a dry run for the 2014 recruiting game. Could they persuade a major star to stay with Bryant?

The Lakers meeting took place in Beverly Hills on July 2 in the modernist, windowless conference room at Relativity Media—the offices of Howard’s agent. Kupchak, Howard’s closest ally on the team, prepped the Lakers’ pitch. One big point: Listen carefully. Another: Dress appropriately. “Our approach,” a Lakers source explained at the time, “is that we are interviewing for the job. We want to show that this is a place his dreams can come true.”

As the Lakers’ contingent settled into the conference room’s ergonomic chairs, it was clear that two-time MVP point guard Steve Nash, in a nice crisp shirt, listening attentively, was running Kupchak’s game plan. But Bryant showed up, according to a person in the room, in “hoops shorts, a T-shirt and a gold chain.” He had also packed an attitude.

When Howard asked why his teammates let the injured center take all the flak when the Lakers’ season went south, Nash said he didn’t know that Howard had felt that way and that had he known, he would have acted differently. Bryant, on the other hand, offered a crash course in developing thick skin and a mini lecture on learning how to win. Sources told ESPN Insider Chris Broussard that Bryant’s

lecture was “a complete turnoff” for Howard.

“It wasn’t an easy meeting to be involved in,” Kupchak later said on Cowherd’s radio show. “And I decline to go into great detail.” Howard shortly thereafter chose to leave for the Rockets, even though it cost him roughly \$30 million in guaranteed salary.

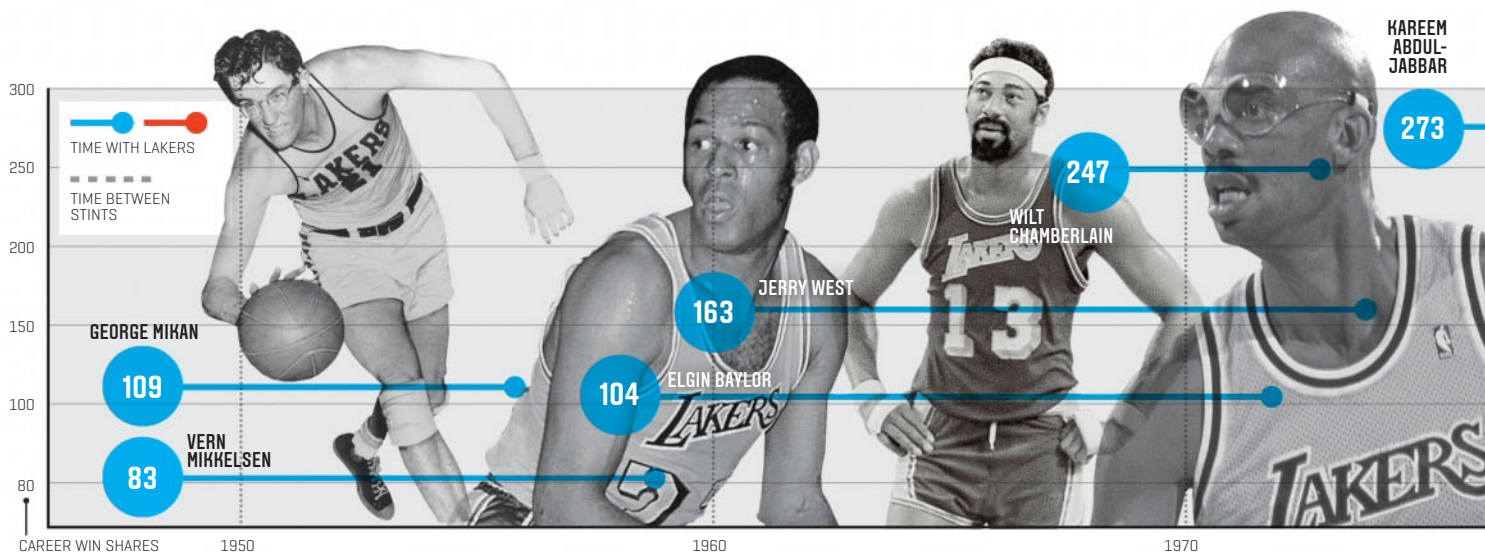
The story of the Lakers’ losing Howard has been told as one of the big man chafing under Mike D’Antoni’s offense. One Lakers source, though, says Howard’s issue wasn’t really with the offensive scheme but that “he saw one particular player play outside that scheme with carte blanche, with no accountability. These people who say Dwight couldn’t handle the pressure of Los Angeles ... that’s nonsense. LA was everything Dwight wanted. To be celebrated. To be among stars. To be among women of this caliber. To live, basically, in one big reality TV show. This was a perfect setting for him.”

Bryant, who declined through a Lakers spokesman to comment for this story, playfully grumbles about today’s youth and their new-fangled ways, but there really is an element to his play that is from the past. By the old points-per-game measure, he was not just a perennial All-Star but one of the best players ever. But the league has changed around Bryant, and swiftly. The movement of people and the ball, 3s, rim attacks, coordinated defensive effort and generating open shots for teammates

HEY, WHERE DID EVERYBODY GO?

Throughout their history, the Lakers have been a magnet for all-time greats.* They came, they Showtimed, they conquered. But since Shaq’s departure, Pau Gasol is the only star to stick around at least 150 games with Kobe Bryant. And now Gasol is gone too.

*PLAYERS WITH 80-PLUS CAREER WIN SHARES, AT LEAST ONE LAKERS SEASON WITH 5-PLUS WIN SHARES AND AT LEAST 150 GAMES WITH THE TEAM.



21.7

MACHINE GUN

Since the 2004-05 season, Bryant has led the NBA with 21.7 shots per game—a full 1.7 more than LeBron James, who is second on the list.

are what's winning now. Subsuming ego and glorifying teammates is a winning NBA strategy, and it's what D'Antoni and Nash attempted to bring to the Lakers.

After his first year with Bryant, Nash couldn't hide his disappointment when talking to Grantland's Zach Lowe: "I think it'd be nice to find a middle ground where he does his thing but the ball still can move for great parts of the game. ... But I knew it wasn't going to be the same. When you play with Kobe Bryant, the ball is gonna be with him most of the time."

Or it will be, at least, until he shoots it. Bryant has fired away for nearly two decades. He's fourth on the NBA's all-time scoring list, trailing only Kareem, Karl Malone and Michael Jordan. He's also just a few weeks' play from setting an all-time league record for misses. "The problem is, he's just not as good as he thinks he is," says one source in the Lakers' inner circle. "He's just not as efficient as he thinks he is. If he had the other intangibles, like LeBron, or if he was any kind of different person, it would have been easy for us to attract talent, retain it and win."

SO WHY LAST November did the Lakers, knowing all this, extend Bryant's contract two more years? Why not declare victory and walk away from the quagmire of late-stage Bryant? To answer that, we must first understand the predicament of the Lakers' executive VP of player personnel, Jim Buss—a man who earned

final say over basketball decisions because his father, Jerry Buss, bequeathed it to him upon his death in 2013.

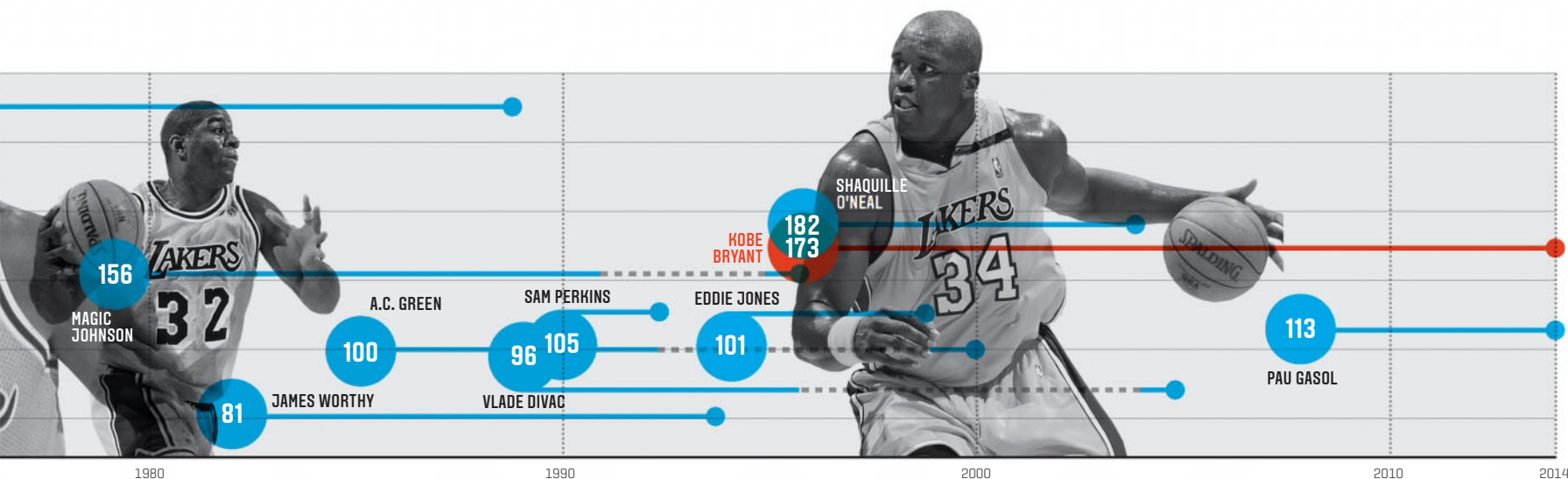
A bequeathal is nice, yet there will always be challenges to his power. For years, a who's who of the NBA world have taken cheap shots at Jim. In 2005, columnist Peter Vecsey introduced the younger Buss to the public, in the pages of the *New York Post*, as a "professional party animal." On ESPN, Magic Johnson once said that he loved Jerry Buss but added, "I don't believe in Jim Buss." He has also discussed Jim's "critical mistakes" in running the team.

Then there's Phil Jackson. By 2011, he was the departing coach of the Lakers, a colleague of Jim's in the upper reaches of the Lakers and, of course, quasi family by nature of his long-term relationship with Jim's sister Jeanie. But when Jackson was leaving the Lakers, he told reporters, "I haven't spoken to Jimmy Buss this year. As far as management, if you want to call

it that, there's really not a relationship." Jim, meanwhile, has said he considers Phil "family." If you want to call it that. Jeanie has talked of the "betrayal" she felt when D'Antoni was hired instead of Jackson seven games into the 2012-13 season.

Fair or not, the effect of these comments has been to give Jim precious little credibility in the eyes of Lakers fans. Here the legacy of his father looms large. Famed for consorting with teenagers, partying and gambling, the Lakers' patriarch was not known for following rules. But as Magic made clear to reporters in the early days of the Shaq-Kobe feud, Jerry Buss had a certain way of doing things: "Our whole organization has been built on the fact that we've always taken care of our own. We've never aired our dirty laundry."

That's how it used to be done, anyway, before Jackson and Bryant changed the MO. Jim is one of the last remaining Lakers who still

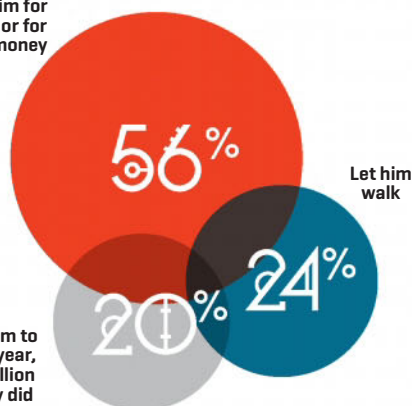




REGARDING KOBE, THE LAKERS SHOULD HAVE:

31,037 votes as of Oct. 3

Signed him for one year or for far less money



follow his father's rule. Jackson may snipe at Buss, but Buss won't snipe back, or at any other Laker. Meanwhile, Bryant is more than willing to give the front office a public tongue-lashing if it suits his needs.

All of which set up Jim to be timid with Bryant. Even as many of his closest advisers insisted the right move was to kiss Bryant goodbye via the amnesty clause—the cash savings alone would have been north of \$70 million, by some estimates—Buss, sources say, had no appetite for picking a fight with the Mamba, or for the damage to his reputation it might cause.

There were also business rationales to keeping Bryant. The first is that the Lakers are the opposite of a typical NBA team, as a business. Yes, they have more revenue. But they require tons more because the Lakers are *the* family business. In most ownership groups, nobody is relying on the team as the prime revenue stream; the team is the high-risk end of a much bigger portfolio. In LA, the team is the linchpin supporting six heirs.

And there is no more important income than the 20-year, \$3 billion Time Warner deal to broadcast Lakers games locally. One well-placed

source who has reviewed Lakers team finances says the Lakers' annual income from that deal hinges on ratings, which tend to go up when Bryant is on the court. If the team had jettisoned Bryant and tanked the past season in the name of a high 2014 draft pick, the resulting low ratings would have smacked the business of the Lakers hard.

That's presumably part of the reason Kupchak has been outspokenly anti-tanking; his bosses won't tell him to outright tank because tanking costs them a fortune. Meanwhile, it's not as if Bryant didn't have his supporters. Lakers season-ticket holders are a who's who of power brokers and celebrities, and in what one Lakers insider believes was a coordinated effort, many called Jim to make clear they expected him to bring Bryant back.

And so it was that Jim resolved to skip a public battle with Bryant by signing him early. The younger Buss also "didn't want contract negotiations to go public," according to a source. And in getting it done smoothly, the idea was that Jim could appear "magnanimous and loyal," like his father, who made waves by giving Magic and Shaq eye-poppingly huge deals.

The Lakers take care of their own. "This is Jim's way of providing a parting gift," says a source with knowledge of the negotiations.

Meanwhile, merely keeping Bryant around would, paradoxically, help them say goodbye to him later with less fuss. "This allows fans to come to grips with the reality that they cannot keep winning with him," says the source. "Jim can part ways with Kobe without being seen as betraying him. When he stops playing at a high level, you can begin the transition."

Conspiracy theorists might note Kupchak's odd quote in the team press release at the time of Bryant's extension, which seemed to leave little wiggle room for another deal after this one: "We've said all along that our priority and hope was to have Kobe finish his career as a Laker, and this should ensure that that happens. To play 20 years in the NBA, and to do so with the same team, is unprecedented, and quite an accomplishment." And although Kupchak declined through a Lakers spokesman to comment for this story, he has ever-so-subtly

20-SECOND TIMEOUT

ESPN'S NBA FRONT OFFICE—OUR WAR ROOM OF TOP NBA MINDS—WILL DEBATE ALMOST ANYTHING. THE TOPIC FOR THIS 20:

WHO IS THE NBA'S MOST OVERRATED PLAYER?

DIRECTOR OF SCOUTING AMIN ELHASSAN:

Kobe Bryant. He's been a great player for so long, but the residual affection has lasted far too long. What sets, say, a Tim Duncan apart is his philosophy: If I'm going to continue to be the best player on this team, we are limiting our potential.

COACH GEORGE KARL: Can I give it to the 2014 NBA draft class? I saw those guys play over the summer, and I didn't see any superstars.

ASSISTANT GM CHAD FORD: Funny, Coach, but I'd go James Harden. We've all seen the effort he gives on defense, right? And I'll put Kyrie Irving with him—Kyrie ranked 43rd among point guards in real plus-minus last year.

GM TOM PENN: Good insights, everybody, but for me it's Dwight Howard. He's one of the best centers in the game, but can you really win it all with him? He has to step up and be the go-to guy. I mean, he still can't shoot free throws or convert from the block. That's a problem. So ...

THE FINAL ANSWER

DWIGHT HOWARD





Kobe, hero-baller: "He wants to win," one insider says, "but only as long as he's the reason we're winning."

made clear that he didn't dream up Bryant's deal, telling the *Los Angeles Times*: "It's been ownership's position that he deserved every penny, or will deserve every penny of that extension."

SO DID KOBE BRYANT deserve the extension? And if not, why give it? The answer might lie in yet another question: Is it possible the Lakers felt free to squander cap space on the contract because there was no point in having cap space? When you can't even bribe players to play with Kobe Bryant, what's the point in bribe money? As one rival front office executive says: "I'm sure Mitch already investigated and found out he didn't need two max slots because the destination isn't all that attractive until Kobe

has completely left the premises."

"Mitch did his homework," says another NBA exec. "He can't get a marquee player to play alongside Kobe, cap space be damned." As several agents around the league said, it's tough, after so many failed attempts, to convince any player that they'll love playing with Bryant.

"He wants to win," says a source close to Lakers decision makers. "But only as long as he's the reason we're winning, as long as the performance is not affecting his numbers. No one works harder than Kobe. And no one sabotages his own efforts more. He's scaring off the free agents we're trying to get. We're trying to surround you with talent and your ego is getting in the way."

It's no wonder, then, that the Lakers' summer

of 2014 free agency fizzled. Just a few years ago, the NBA whisper network was thick with the notion that LeBron was destined to be the next hero of purple and gold. But when James hit the free agent market, the Lakers' talks with James' agent, Rich Paul, failed to even materialize in a sit-down meeting with the star.

After James, Carmelo Anthony was high on the Lakers' list. And the particular way that recruitment was botched—Bryant made news by flying home from Europe, but somehow wires got crossed and he missed the meeting anyway—reminded Lakers insiders of the manner in which he nearly alienated Steve Nash in 2012. In the days before LA acquired Nash, sources say, the point guard wanted to hear from Bryant that the Lakers' star was amenable to having Nash control the ball much of the time—a key tenet of the D'Antoni offense from the Suns days. When Lakers brass asked Bryant to call Nash, Bryant failed to do so, saying he preferred that Nash call him. The pettiness took days to resolve and nearly scuttled the deal.

While the Lakers were going after Anthony in vain, they quietly pursued Chris Bosh as well, but he preferred the carcass of the Heat. Paul George, Angelino through and through, had once been the team's safest choice. But sources say one reason the two-way star had re-signed with the Pacers in the fall of 2013 instead was that he was turned off by the thought that Bryant would police his efforts.

And so it is today that the Lakers' faithful strain to envision titles with a rejuvenated Bryant supported by Jeremy Lin, rookie Julius Randle and journeyman bigs Jordan Hill and Ed Davis. The view in the Lakers' front office is that any real rebuild will have to wait until after Bryant's retirement. "This has finally come home," says a Lakers insider. "Major players don't want to play with Kobe, and Jimmy is waiting for him to leave."

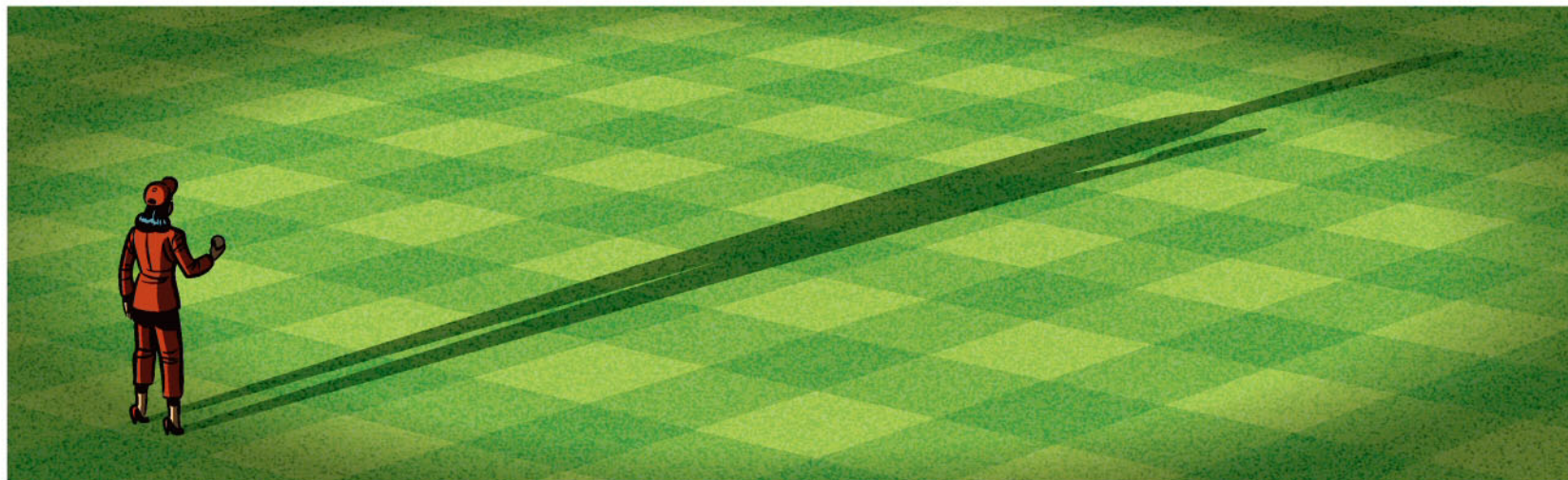
"It's like the wedding of a child to someone you do not approve of," adds the source about the Lakers' view of Bryant. "If you can't stop it, you simply go through the motions."

About the best you can do is hope it will all be over soon. ■

THE TICKET



by MINA KIMES



[BEHIND IN THE COUNT] *The NFL is beginning to hire more female executives, so why are the numbers in MLB's front office moving in the opposite direction?*

[T]he Mets should send a fruit basket to Roger Goodell. When the NFL's bungled attempt to extinguish the Ray Rice fiasco backfired, the acrid smoke wafting from the commissioner's office in Manhattan masked a scandal across the river at Citi Field. The NFL is the target of our scorn, but it isn't the only league with a gender problem.

On Sept. 10, a woman named Leigh Castergine, previously the Mets' senior VP of ticket sales and service, sued the team and its part-owner, Jeffrey Wilpon, for discrimination. Castergine, a rising star who had been with the team since 2010, had been rewarded with a promotion, hefty bonuses and accolades—until she got pregnant. Then, the suit alleges, Wilpon “began to humiliate Castergine,” publicly stating that he objected to her having a baby out of wedlock. Castergine says Wilpon told a co-worker that people would respect her more if she were married; at one meeting, she adds, he checked her finger for a ring. After complaining about this treatment, she was fired.

The case has not gone to trial, and the Mets have denied the charges. When asked about the suit by a reporter, Commissioner Bud Selig would only say, “We’re just going to have to see how it plays out.” Although many of the details of the case are still inconclusive, one fact is both irrefutable and telling: Castergine was the first female senior VP in the Mets' 53-year history. Now that she's gone, there are zero women in that position. Thirty of the 31 executives listed in the Mets' front office directory are men.

The NFL has been castigated, rightfully, for its lack of female executives. The Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport (TIDES) recently gave the NFL a C- for its gender hiring practices but found that the tally of women in the league's front office had improved. MLB, meanwhile, is headed in the opposite direction: According to TIDES, the percentage of women in its central office declined last year, to 30 percent. (That's down from over 50 percent in 1994.) The percentages of female senior executives, directors and managers? All down.

Castergine's complaint isn't an aberration. In 2011, another woman, also

in ticket sales, sued the White Sox for discrimination. Despite consistently receiving excellent reviews, Debra Theobald alleged, she was repeatedly turned down for promotions and forced to report to less qualified men. In 2010, after the White Sox promoted a man with less experience above her, some female co-workers “wept and expressed shock and dismay,” Theobald said. After Illinois' Department of Human Rights gave her the green light to file suit, the team agreed to a confidential settlement.

At the time, ESPN's Lester Munson wrote that it would be “a big surprise if the franchise doesn't hire a few women for top jobs in the near future.” Three years later, the White Sox have zero female VPs. So do the Royals and A's. Overall, just 17.5 percent of MLB team VPs are women.

Several women have scaled baseball's corporate ladder, but their ranks are still deplorably thin; one would be hard-pressed to field a starting lineup. The Astros' Pam Gardner, the longest-tenured female chief executive in baseball, stepped down in 2012. MLB's first female head trainer, Sue Falsone, left the Dodgers last fall. Then there's Kim Ng. Ng, MLB's senior VP of baseball operations, has reportedly interviewed for GM gigs with at least four teams. *Newsweek* once said she was “in line to become the sport's first female GM.” That was in 2006.

Matt Bourne, an MLB spokesman, says there are several high-ranking women in the commissioner's office and that the league is “committed to recruiting, hiring and developing female employees at all levels.” But even for a sport known for its plodding pace of change, baseball's crawl toward gender parity has been glacial. Some blame the lack of female students in sports management programs; others argue that it's hard for women to reach the C-suite without playing experience (although in today's analytics-driven world, many male executives aren't exactly stud athletes).

Ultimately, though, it's on baseball's leadership to expand recruitment. Given that women constitute nearly half of the fan base, according to MLB, they're well suited to sell the sport to themselves. Until the league wakes up to this, it's playing with a shallow bench. ■